

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 24th May 2020**  
*Acts 1: 6 – 14; John 17: 1 - 11*

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you,”<sup>1</sup> said Jesus to his Father, recorded in John's Gospel in the last verse of our reading this morning, before Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection. “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”

They are in the world, and I am coming to you. That turned out to be very true, as we read in the reading from the book of Acts this morning, in which, following his crucifixion and his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses to the ends of the earth – that is, they would be in the world – then immediately, Acts records, he “...was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight,” – that is he went to his Father.

This cloud that took him from their sight is an infuriating thing. Not only did it obscure Jesus from his watching disciples, it also obscures from us both the theological significance and, more importantly, the humour that runs through this account of Jesus' ascension to heaven. If only we would spend more time looking at the earth rather than up into in the sky at the cloud, we might find Jesus' ascension a more satisfying ending to Jesus Christ's life on earth, and a more inspiring – if quite funny - story told for us as we try to live out our calling as his disciples.

As the angels said to those original disciples, “...why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” If we also listen to these words from the angels, and if we too stop looking into the sky, we may recognise both the satisfying theology and the inspiring and funny story.

If you find yourself looking upwards and wondering whether you should take this account of Jesus floating upwards into a cloud seriously, stop. That is not where your gaze should be directed. This isn't meant to be a historical account of Jesus leaving earth, but a theological one.

In short, back at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis we discover that through one man, Adam, human beings' relationship with God was broken - death followed - and human beings were expelled from Eden. Now, at the end of the Bible narrative, through another man, Jesus, human beings' relationship with God is restored, - life in all its fullness follows - and human beings are welcomed back into Paradise, back into the relationship with God that existed before the fall from grace.

That is the theological point being made here. The story is not trying to convey an eyewitness account of how Jesus left earth, but a theological point that God and people have been reconciled. The story of the Bible is now complete. Our relationship with God was broken and we were thrown out of Eden, but now Jesus has restored our relationship with God, and he is welcomed back into Paradise. If we have faith in him, then our relationship with God will also be restored, and we too will be welcomed back into Paradise. The ascension of Jesus is a neat theological conclusion to the story on the Bible.

But, it is much more than just theology. The story of Jesus' ascension is also a very funny story, and in that humour we find the story's significance, and inspiration.

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:11

It begins with the disciples asking Jesus when he will restore Israel. As if, after all that he has taught them, they still expect him to be the one who is going to do all the work, while they stand on the side-lines watching and cheering him on. So, he spells it out clearly, "...you will receive power ... and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth,"<sup>2</sup> he says to them.

And then he leaves. And what do they do, these people who have been charged with power and a mission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth? They stand still and stare into the sky. Until angels appear, to give them a nudge in the right direction; asking them just what they think they're doing standing there staring up into the sky.

Then, after the clear steer from Jesus and the impatient nudge from the angels, do the disciples head off in to the streets of Jerusalem, head out to the regions of Judea and Samaria, set out on a journey to the ends of the earth with the power of the Holy Spirit blazing in their hearts? No, they do not, instead they returned to the room they've been cowering in all this time, shut themselves inside, and started praying as individuals, indeed Acts even lists their individual names.

We will hear next week at Pentecost how the Holy Spirit will change all this, set this group ablaze with power, bind them together as a single body, and drive them out of this room, away from their prayers, into the streets, transforming them from a group of individuals who followed Jesus, who stared up into to the sky, who locked themselves away, who spent all day on their knees, in to a single body, the Church, to preach, live and spread the Gospel there in Jerusalem firstly, then Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth.

Jesus had to show them through his life and teaching; then he had to tell them in no uncertain terms; then angels had to nudge them; then the Holy Spirit had to inspire them; before the realised that in this world the Kingdom of God is built by the preaching, the life, and the mission of those who have faith in Jesus Christ, and who call themselves his disciples.

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you."<sup>3</sup>

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

"You will receive power ... and you will be my witnesses..."

Stop wondering who will fix this. Stop staring up into the heavens for an answer. Stop wondering what is inside that cloud. God is there, he will be with you, you don't need to worry about that. Instead, you have a story to tell about Jesus. You have a life to live inspired by Jesus. You have work to do in transforming people's lives with faith and restoring their relationship with God and each other based on Jesus' ministry of peace, love and merciful justice.

Worship and prayer and fellowship - what we do on a Sunday morning - are important. After all, we need to understand and strengthen our faith, and build our community, the Church, Christ's body on earth. But, worship and prayer and fellowship, as important as they are, aren't where the action is. The action is out there. "You will be my witnesses," witnesses to relationships restored in love between people and God, and restored in love between people and other people.

"You will be my witnesses."

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 1: 8

<sup>3</sup> John 17:11