

Hinde Street Methodist Church

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I'm finding that the world can be split into two groups of people: those who haven't really noticed how important feet are, and those who know they take all the weight of our being and determine where we can go and what we can do. I've increasingly moved into the second group over the last few years, which has made it easier to spot which group others are in. Noticing my feet problems, others have opened up about how, what should be a small issue, suddenly has a big impact when it affects their feet. And it has allowed me to hear things in the bible I might otherwise have missed. Considering Jesus washing his disciples feet when, just at the moment, I can't wash my feet but have to put plastic bags on them in the shower and use wet wipes around the dressings. Noticing, last week, how the man by the pool of Bethesda needing someone else to carry him to the pool is like a day surgery patient, who must have someone to fetch them and be with them for at least 24 hours afterwards.

It's certainly not original to preach on feet in relation to the ascension. I can remember at least two Ascension Day services at Hinde Street that recalled the Chapel of the Ascension in Walsingham in Norfolk. In that Chapel, there is a model of Jesus' feet hanging from the ceiling. We know they are Jesus' feet both from the wounds on them and the gold trailing from them. We can stand there on our own feet, and look up at Jesus' feet disappearing into the stars.

This morning I want to explore Jesus' ascension from the perspective of feet. To remind us of three things we learn about Jesus, as we look up at Jesus ascending. But also three things that apply to our lives today, as we stand on our own two feet.

Firstly, Jesus' ascension overcomes the indignity of the crucifixion

It is our tradition in Hinde Street to focus on Jesus' humanity: we're quite comfortable with the fact that Jesus understood suffering, and draw comfort and strength from worshipping a God who is not up there with no idea what human life is like. So much so we perhaps forget how outrageous it is that God was crucified, died the death of a criminal, died a drawn out death of gradual asphyxiation, died outside the city in the rubbish dump.

The resurrection shows Jesus overcoming death. The ascension shows Jesus restored to God and overcoming the indignity of crucifixion. Ephesians 1:20 says: "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places", while Hebrews 1:3 says: "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"

We are left with no room for doubt about who Jesus is. He may have had no honourable death but his departure mirrors Elijah and many stories of the time when Roman Emperors ascended as a sign they were gods, and figures such as Enoch, Baruch and Levi where their ascension indicated they had God's approval.

Secondly, the ascension helps us understand where Jesus is

While his ascension leaves no room for doubt about who he is, it leaves plenty of room for confusion about where Jesus is. At the time Luke and Acts were written, it answered the question of why Jesus doesn't continue to appear among us as he did to his disciples following his resurrection. Now we know about the levels of the earth's atmosphere, we can see deep into space, and humans regularly travel into space, it's a bit embarrassing. If Jesus went up, where did he go and why hasn't space exploration found him? If we say Jesus is everywhere, is that the same as saying he is nowhere?

Some of this confusion around the ascension sows the seeds of our confusion in two weeks' time when we get to Trinity Sunday. Is the ascended Jesus with us, or is that the Holy Spirit?

The answer to the question: "where is Jesus", is the answer "Jesus is with God". In a time when God was thought to be up, and in the heavens, that would have been a good enough answer, and the meaning of the ascension would be clear rather than embarrassing. The visionary and symbolic meaning would not have got lost in discussions of where 'up' is. In the era of Newtonian physics, it became a problem. But some theologians remind us that in post-Newtonian physics, of, for example, superstring theories, physics is often stranger than mythology.

We are back in an era when we can answer the question "where did Jesus go" with the answer "with God", without feeling we have to compromise what we know from science.

Before we get too preoccupied with the question “where is up”, **the third key thing about the ascension is that it reinforces our belief that earth and heaven combine.** It’s perhaps something we remember more at Christmas, as we celebrate Jesus coming among us. But the ascension is another key indication that there isn’t a realm of God and a realm of humans. Through Jesus coming among us and then returning to be with God, we are united. We speak not of heaven or of earth, but of heaven and earth.

We’ve looked up as Jesus is lifted up and clouds took him out of sight. Now let’s focus our own feet, taking the weight of our lives.

Firstly, the ascension reminds us we have to stand on our own feet

“Do not hold on to me” Jesus says to Mary Magdalene in John’s gospel, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” (John 20:17)

How much easier things are when someone good is in charge. Someone else. How much easier to be followers, especially when there is no chance they might be wrong. When there is no chance we will need to step in. When we can blame someone else if it doesn’t go quite right.

Following Jesus wasn’t easy. Most of the time his disciples didn’t know where the next meal would come from or where they would sleep that night. There was the ever present threat from upsetting the religious authorities or occupying government. But Jesus’ ascension made discipleship all the more challenging for them. They could no longer just follow Jesus around. They had to decide what to do, where to go, how to fulfil what Jesus had taught them. They had to stand on their own feet. No wonder they wanted to hold on to the risen Jesus. If that was the case for those first disciples, how much more true it is for us. We can’t blindly follow or copy. We have to work things out. There is a responsibility on us.

I’ve often found I’ve been at my best when circumstances have thrown unlooked for responsibility on me, or circumstances have meant there is space to try something without needing to get someone’s permission first. I’ve learnt things about what I can do that have meant next time I’ve been more willing or have gone ahead without talking myself out of it.

I thought this was unique to me. Until one day a senior colleague who had a glittering career and was clearly going to go far confided in me that he had chosen roles where he knew there would be space for him to take responsibility, as he found he performed at his best in those situations. I didn’t think someone so obviously talented would also find this.

I remember visiting an old team to see how they were getting on. A colleague who I’d found quite shy and reluctant, and needed me there to encourage him, told me about the first time he’d faced something difficult after I left. “As you weren’t here anymore, it made me give it a go on my own”, he told me. I could see his confidence had grown in the time since I’d gone far more than it had with my attempt at encouragement.

Jesus’ ascension is both a challenge to us to take responsibility to stand on our own two feet, but also a sign of the trust placed in us.

We have not, however, been abandoned.

Our readings for the ascension leave us with the expectation of what is to come, as we will celebrate next week, with Pentecost. But our relationship with Jesus isn’t just replaced by the coming of the Holy Spirit, it changes so that prayer is at its heart.

Our **second point** from the perspective of our own feet is that prayer becomes the basis of our relationship with Jesus.

Romans 8:34 says: “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”

We might not be able to follow Jesus around, but he is still there, pleading on our behalf. The dictionary definition of intercede reminds us it has connotations of acting as a peacemaker between two parties, and comes from the Latin word meaning to intervene. Jesus has far from gone, but is still actively involved in our lives if we allow ourselves that interaction we call prayer.

We heard from Ephesians something about that relationship possible through prayer:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which

he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

The Methodist Church has joined with the Church of England and Christians around the world to set aside the eight days between Ascension Day, last Thursday, and Pentecost next Sunday, as a time for prayer. In part it is to demystify prayer for those who don't think they can do it right, to remove some of the embarrassment we might feel in praying, and to strengthen one another by praying together and knowing so many others are praying around the world. If you didn't start on Thursday, why not begin today?

This new relationship with Jesus of trust and responsibility needs a new name. As Jesus says in John's gospel: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15: 15)

Our third point from the perspective of our own feet is that this is a relationship built on friendship.

Friendship reminds us of the mutual responsibility in the relationship, even a relationship with God. We can draw on our own experiences of friendships with one another. Those people where we don't feel inferior or superior. Friendship that takes it out of us, but we know we get back more than we could measure. Where give and take doesn't need to be measured because we have confidence that we both benefit, no matter what each day brings. We can also use this friendship relationship with Jesus to assess how much of a friend we are to others. Are we taking mutual responsibility in our relationships with others, or do they only function if one of us takes charge and the other follows? Do we know how to be with other people without insisting on being either leader or follower?

Why do we stand looking up towards heaven? Can we not take the weight of it all? We have no choice but to try and get around with the feet that we have, however painful and insecure they may feel, however much we feel we need external support and assistance. We can rely on God. But God has also trusted us with taking responsibility and to stand on our own two feet. So pray, through Jesus who intercedes for us, for strength and guidance to take the responsibility. Trust that God within us is more than enough. And take a step closer.