

Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 16 May 2021  
11.00am David Thompson

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> March: What does the Ascension of Jesus have to teach us about our role as the Church?**

Today is Ascension Sunday, so I want us to ask what the Ascension of Jesus has to teach us about our role as the Church?

For the first three years of my teaching career, I had the pleasure of teaching and living in Birmingham. Just a walk away from my flat was the cathedral, St Phillip's. Owing to there not being a Methodist church in close vicinity, I became a regular worshipper. The building is a splendid example of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque style and was built to cater for the expanding market town (it didn't become the cathedral till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). However, its claim to fame is not its architecture, but the four stain-glassed windows, which were put in in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Designed by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Edward Burne Jones, they depict the nativity, crucifixion, the last judgement, and above the altar, the ascension.

**\*Shown here**

Its position as centrepiece above the altar, is reflective of the prominence that the Church pays to the ascension in the Church calendar, on the ascension being a moment of great glory and power. Today is Ascension Sunday and is testimony to the fact that the Church continues to recognise the Ascension as a great festival.

However, the same emphasis cannot be found in the biblical tradition. The Gospels rarely mention it. Both Mark and Luke give it one line (24:51 and 16:19) and Matthew, who doesn't mention it all, chooses to focus on the commissioning of the disciples to go and make disciples out of all nations. There is nothing mentioned in John, either.

The most descriptive account of the ascension is found in Luke's sequel to the Gospel, the book of Acts, and even this account is more focussed on what is to come, then what is happening at the time. "Men of Galilee", the angels say, "Why are you looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." They are of course talking of the Holy Spirit, which will come at Pentecost. This neatly confirms ascension as the interlude between Easter and Pentecost, an interlude between **promise and fulfilment**.

You would be forgiven for thinking it strange, then, for why so much prominence is put on the ascension by the Church and why the Victorian Brummies chose to put it above the altar.

Just as the disciples were not given a clear answer to Jesus when they asked whether this was the time in which the Lord will restore Israel, so it is that there is no clear answer to this question on the prominence of the Ascension.

- One explanation is that the ascension is the Early Church trying to address that they were no longer feeling the presence of the resurrected Jesus, who they believe will return immanently. Jesus is no longer located on earth, but in heaven and will come again.
- A second explanation is that the ascension confirms that Jesus will intercede through prayer, for as the creed tells us, he is seated on the right hand of God. This is what Paul says, when he explains to the Ephesians why he prays to Jesus.
- A third, is that it gives hope to us that we will too be taken up to heaven to be with God.

However, just as the cloud takes Jesus up and the disciples are left to marvel, we too are left to contemplate the mystery of God, for there is not one correct explanation.

- Another explanation, is what the ascension calls the disciples to become: Christ's earthly representatives. For, as we have heard, the angels tell the disciples not to look up at the sky but focus on the earth.

**This last explanation is the one that I wish to leave us with this morning.**

No longer present on earth, Jesus' ascension, if you like, passes the baton onto those present at his ascension and subsequently to us as the Church.

What does it require, though, to be Christ's earthly representatives? Our Gospel reading gives us some direction on this.

Known as the high-priestly prayer, owing to the belief that this is Jesus praying from 'above', this is his prayer to his community of disciples that he has left behind, the Church. He prays for protection for them, that they will even have his joy and mostly importantly, in verse 11, "that they be one, as we are one." To be as one as we are one. As Christ, is one with God, the Church is to be one with Him. This is the goal at the end of it all, if we are to live as Christ's earthly representatives. **To be one with Christ himself.**

In one of Jesus' most famous parables, the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus tells us that when we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner, we are clothing Him, feeding Him, welcoming Him and visiting Him. Our calling, then, is to act as Christ's earthly representatives in the conversations we have, the people meet and the jobs that we feel called to do. We are to treat each other as if they are Christ themselves, and through this earthly living we can seek to be one with Christ. The ascension, therefore, calls us to be Christ's earthly representatives, for in his ascending to heaven, Christ makes it possible for us to live the life he wants

us to live. However, we must not believe that we are on our own, for as is promised at the ascension, Christ comes again through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Ascension, therefore, teaches us not to look up at the sky, as the disciples did, in their searching for him, but instead look around us in the street corner, the workplace and even in church to find the Christ that calls us to be one with him.

Reflecting again on the stained-glass window of the ascension above the altar, we can begin to understand the prominence that is placed on this event, for behind the marvel, glory and splendour, lies our calling and goal as disciples of Christ.

### **Silence**

A prayer from Karl Rahner

Lord, when you return even as you have departed from us a true man, then may you find yourself in us as the one who bears all, is patient, is faithful, is kind...loves and is joyful. Lord may you find yourself in us, being what we would so much wish to be yet are not.

**Amen**