

Merrylea Parish Church Glasgow.
Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Revd Jim Gibson.

24th May 2020
Sunday after the Ascension.

“Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you.’

Then Jesus led them out of the city as far as Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them. As he was blessing them, he departed from them and was taken up into heaven. They worshipped him and went back into Jerusalem, filled with great joy, and spent all their time in the Temple giving thanks to God.” (St. Luke 24: 45-end).

‘Goodbye’ can be a very hard word to say. Throughout our lives we may have to say many goodbyes: to colleagues who leave work, neighbours who remove house, family starting a new life abroad. Invariably, it is a painful experience.

Last week, I was asked to conduct the funeral of a gentleman who sadly succumbed to Covid-19. While making the necessary arrangements, his son told me of the happy, supportive family background in which he and his brother had been raised. His mother, retired from a career in nursing, suffered a stroke in her early 60s which brought on dementia. His father took early retirement to care for her until her death. Their greatest joy had come with the marriages of their sons and the birth of two grandsons. But nothing had been able to truly salve his father following the loss of his wife. Now, the father was seriously ill in hospital and isolated within intensive care from his family. Hugely grateful for the nursing care tenderly given, when their dad’s end of life was close the two sons desperately sought a way of saying goodbye. Tragically, no personal contact was possible. Such intimate words could only be spoken via the telephone. Their parents had always been ‘there’ for them. Now, the sons feel they must now live with the guilt of their not being there when it mattered most for their father.

Not for a second do I believe these sons are guilty of letting their father down. The circumstances of their father’s sad death were beyond their control. Hopefully, once the trauma of recent times eases they may find it possible to remember their parents in love; and the happy times they all shared.

Today is Ascension Sunday. In our increasingly secular world maybe you’re wondering what significance that has. In fact, the Ascension has been described as the most forgotten feast day of the Christian Year. It’s simply the occasion, described by St Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles, when having given his disciples final instructions, Jesus disappears, upward into heaven with a cloud hiding him from their sight. It’s pure metaphor, of course. Poetry, if you like. So don’t waste time trying to rationalise and understand it as anything other. After the resurrection, St Luke relates a number of stories telling how people felt they experienced Jesus alive in their life: women at the tomb, men travelling to Emmaus, the disciples gathered together in Jerusalem. But, now, St Luke is trying to describe the final moment of their parting; and, in the imagination of his mind, the ascension describes that moment. It marks the end of Jesus’ life and, also, the beginning of his after-life which we can experience through the ministry and service of that organism we know as the Church.

The irony of such a seemingly ethereal story is that it actually roots the work of Christianity in the here and now.

It was Karl Marx who remarked that the Church ought to be *'the heart of a heartless world'*. Sadly, many Christians have given up on the material dimension of God's purposes for humanity. Instead they think of religion as though it were some sort of self-help therapy, all about one's mental well-being or some strange esoteric knowledge. Thus we end up with an introverted piety spending all its time gazing up into the heavens and a practical indifference to the material conditions of those who live next door. Truth is, however, that Christianity is the most materialistic of all the world's religious faiths. For with Christianity, God is imagined not as a cloud, nor as a book, but as a human being born in a shed and at one with the physical realities of human life. With Christianity, God is to be found in the dirt and not in the sky.

In the Book of Acts, the writer (St Luke) has two angels present. *"Men of Galilee,"* they say with more than a hint of mockery, *"why do you stand staring into heaven?"*. It's a great question. For not only does it puncture the cliché that *'up'* somehow equates to *'holy'*, a heartbeat after Jesus' departure it also invites the disciples to bring their gaze down to earth and confront the task staring them in the face – to create the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

In the spread of Love's influence among all people here and now perhaps encouragement for us in this task can come from Ann Lewin's short poem:

Ascension
means a God-like view of things.
Rising
above our usual limitations.
Rise, then,
and know the glory of a life
set free from fear.

Prayer:

God of love, though centuries pass, we still find ourselves stretching heavenwards whenever crisis strikes or the challenges of life overwhelm. As our self-isolation continues we are reminded that when Jesus departed this earth he did not leave his disciples alone. He left them with a promise: they would be clothed with power from on high. Whatever our circumstance, may the power of your spirit empower me with new strength to walk life's road ahead. Before you I hold all who are struggling to survive in hospital or care-home because of infection by Covid-19 and those who, from a distance, must watch, and wait, and hope and all who grieve. For medical and care workers here and around the world I pray, where resources are always in short supply; and for national leaders struggling to do their best to fulfil responsibilities. May these extraordinary times lead to deep changes in how the world works so that profound injustices may be addressed and all may work together, each caring for the good of all. Bless my loved ones, my friends, my neighbours, those I know and those I don't; and to the lonely and the anxious bring peace of mind. Hear this prayer in Jesus' name and with whose words I further pray ...

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.