

Easter 7 – 8<sup>th</sup> May 16

Readings: Acts 16: 16-34 ; Psalm 97; Revelation 22: 12- 22; John 17:20-26

Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter – the last Sunday in the wonderful season of Easter. It is also the Sunday after Ascension Day so I want to concentrate on the Ascension this morning, rather than on the readings of the day, which is what I normally do. And as we're together on the last Sunday of Easter, I want to go back to Easter Day for a moment. In his Easter Day sermon preached at St. John's Cathedral, which, by the way is your Cathedral and mine, Archbishop Phillip began:

*To really **get** resurrection, you have to ask the right question. And asking the right question is not so easy for us. We are children of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment. We've succumbed almost exclusively to rational, analytical, scientific ways of thinking. We've become expert at pulling things apart to discover how they work so we can rebuild them, control them, fix them and make ever better versions of them. Our world, our habits, our ways of seeing and thinking are so far removed from the world of the scriptures that we have to concentrate to ask the right question. And the right question to ask of the resurrection is not 'How did it happen?' but 'What does it mean?'*<sup>1</sup>

And I want to suggest that we need to ask exactly the same question of the Ascension. Not "How did it happen?" but "What does it mean?". Shortly we will all say as we recite the Nicene Creed together that Jesus ascended into heaven. When, as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, we say those words what do we mean? We can't just let the Ascension pass us by. Some scholars say it's just the resurrection described in another way. I'm not so sure; I think they have different meanings. We have two accounts of the Ascension and they both come from St. Luke. He ends his gospel with an account of the Ascension and then begins the Acts of the Apostles with a longer, more detailed account. That says to me that it is really important for St. Luke, and therefore for us, and that it is a crucial link, the link between what he says in his gospel and what he says in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke's Gospel is the story of Jesus – who he was, what he said and did, what he taught his disciples. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of the early church as it struggles to grow following the example of what Jesus said and did. First, the church grows through the ministry of the disciples, then as gradually more and more are added to the number Christianity spreads. The account in the first reading this morning is an example of how far the spread is, Paul and Silas, not among the original disciples are in Philippi, a Roman colony in what is now northern Greece. The Ascension story as a kind of overlap reinforces the sense of continuity so important for St. Luke – the continuity between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the early church. But the Ascension story raises an unspoken, but significant, question "What shall we do about the Risen Jesus?" What would happen if there were no ascension? Would the Risen Jesus live forever in some kind of earthly form? Would the disciples go out on their ministry with the energy and vigour they do if Jesus were still there to shepherd them along? The Ascension functions as a literary device in a couple of ways. Firstly as the link or overlap I mentioned before, and secondly it serves to get Jesus "off the stage" in a physical sense and let the disciples get on with the work of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached at St. John's Cathedral the Archbishop of Brisbane on Easter Day 2016

Many of the post-resurrection narratives are foreshadowing a time in which the disciples will move from followers to leaders, shaping the future of Christ's mission. For example, in the story in St. Luke's gospel of the men on the road to Emmaus,<sup>2</sup> Luke tells us that Jesus beginning with Moses and the prophets interprets to them everything about himself in all the scriptures. In St. John's gospel, in the account of Jesus appearing on the beach he prepares both Peter and John for what is to come next.<sup>3</sup> And also in St. John's gospel, much of what is known as Jesus farewell discourse with his disciples which follows after he washes their feet is beginning to prepare them for the time when he is not there.<sup>4</sup> They find it very difficult, of course, but Jesus knows he needs to intentionally step out of the way for his followers to claim their destiny as spiritual leaders.

The Ascension of Jesus is a curious event for persons who no longer see themselves as living in the old three - decker universe – heaven above, earth in the middle, and Sheol (the land of the dead) below. Literal images of Jesus ascending and later descending from the clouds perpetuate a world view that many can no longer accept. When anything or anyone rises into the sky it or they don't get to heaven. There's either a continuous orbit around the earth, or if the pull of gravity is broken, a drift into the infinity of space. But the story would resonate deeply with Luke's first readers. Deep within their religious tradition were the stories of the great prophet Elijah and his disciple Elisha. Elijah also ascends into heaven, Elijah also bestows his spirit on his disciple<sup>5</sup> (just as Jesus does on his disciples – and we celebrate that next week at Pentecost). So we are not really reading history in the ascension stories. We are watching Luke paint a theological picture drawn from the Hebrew scriptures to present who Jesus was – that he was, as he always said he was one with God – and through Jesus we are called to the same oneness with God. And to paint the picture, Luke uses the only language he has available, the magnificent and wonderful language of his religious tradition. The ascension is really important and we don't need to worry about the mechanics or geography of Ascension. If we do we'll miss the point. Rather, we can see the Ascension as an invitation to a wider vision and faith perspective among those who follow Jesus. And the vision and faith perspective is painted on a vast canvas – Jesus can no longer be regarded as some local holy man restricted to one place and time, but he is truly Lord of all – “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named” as Paul writes in Ephesians Chapter 1<sup>6</sup>. “Above” is meant I think in terms of influence, authority not altitude. The ascension means that Christ shares in the reign of God over all creation – the phrase “at the right hand of the Father” refers not to a place, but that Jesus has been exalted to his rightful glory.

The Ascension also points to Jesus' affirmation of the disciples' ability (and ours) to shape his message for the future. John's gospel reports that Jesus tells his disciples that he has chosen them so they will bear fruit, fruit that will last.<sup>7</sup> Jesus is not a micromanager or some kind of control freak, but leaves the future in the hands of his followers. Even though he is not physically present they will always be influenced by Jesus message and teaching, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the creative transforming power of God. The disciples are given the freedom to creatively

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 24: 13-35

<sup>3</sup> John 21

<sup>4</sup> John 13:21-17:25

<sup>5</sup> 2 Kings 2

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 1:21

<sup>7</sup> John 15:16

transform Jesus' message in future generations. Indeed, we are part of that ongoing process of creative transformation. In our pluralistic 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia, it's up to us to shape the Christianity of the future. That might seem a big ask, but as with all big asks, we begin with what we can realistically do in our own place – here – in St. Paul's Ipswich. Fr. Owen in his sermon last week observed that you've begun that journey, and I hope I can continue that journey with you and contribute as I am able. Many of the things we experienced no longer resonate in the community at large. People have different concerns. Society has different emphases. Perhaps one example is how the church has had to re-engage with matters concerning the environment and the integrity of creation. There are great theological perspectives to be offered – after all our scriptures begin with two accounts of the creation, and in the first<sup>8</sup>, a constant refrain is that “God saw that it was good.” We have a lot to offer, yet for years the church virtually ignored environmental matters and almost too late realized it was being left behind by more shrill voices. We've had to creatively transform the message – and thankfully now one of the marks of mission of the Anglican Communion is “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth”.

The Ascension holds two important spiritual truths for Christians then and now. Firstly the future is open. We do not know when the realm of God will be fully realised. Jesus often told his hearers that this wasn't for them to know. Our calling is to be partners in bringing God's love and peace and justice “to earth as it is in heaven.” Secondly, when, in the Ascension story, the angels admonish the disciples “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”<sup>9</sup> not to “look at heaven,” they are reminding them – and us – that our work is here on earth. If it is true that God is omnipresent, we are always in the presence of God, receiving guidance, insight, and challenge. A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple said “the Ascension of Christ is his liberation from all the restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from the earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth.”

Ascension Christians look “upward” to find a perspective for living holy lives today. We don't need to look ahead to the afterlife: the Spirit of Christ is our companion right here, whether in the hurly burly of everyday life or in our deepest hopes and secret fears, or in our concern for the mission of the Church and our parish. We can embrace God's future beyond this lifetime only if we are faithful to God's calling today.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul prays that the new group of Christians who receive his letter may receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they will have real hope and experience divine power moving through their lives.<sup>10</sup> God's power is immeasurable, but our awareness of that, and our feelings of inadequacy shape how much of that power we can experience in our lives. As church, we are Christ's “body, the fullness of Christ who fills all in all.”<sup>11</sup> This power of God moving through all things invites us to ask: Do we expect too little of God's power in the church? Do we expect too little of ourselves? While we may look askance at the grandiose claims some Christians

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:1-2:4

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1:11

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 1:17-19

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 1:23

make, we must admit that they don't lack for belief; they don't let mountains get in their way, but believe that God can make a way where there appears to be no way.

In light of the Ascension, we are asked to embrace a larger perspective on our lives and the church. Remember the vast canvas against which the Ascension is set. Sure we need to be realistic and embrace the concrete limitations of life, but we don't need to think small. Ascension invites us to think big, to get on with the business of living out the faith we affirm and to claim our vocation as God's partners in God's mission of transforming the world.