

Morning Worship for Sunday 16 May

From the United Reformed Church in Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt Bavington

Opening Words

John's gospel tells us that the risen Jesus said to Mary: "Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet returned to the Father.

Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Hymn: R&S 253 God is gone up on high

1 God is gone up on high,
with a triumphant noise;
the clarions of the sky
proclaim the angelic joys!
*Join all on earth, rejoice and sing;
glory ascribe to glory's king.*

God in the flesh below,
for us he reigns above:
let all the nations know
our Jesus' conquering love! *[Refrain]*

All power to our great Lord
is by the Father given;
by angel hosts adored,
he reigns supreme in heaven. *[Refrain]*

High on his holy seat
he bears the righteous sway;
his foes beneath his feet
shall sink and die away. *[Refrain]*

till all the earth, renewed
in righteousness divine,
with all the hosts of God
in one great chorus join. *[Refrain]*

Charles Wesley

Opening Prayer

Risen and Ascended Lord,
you have indeed gone up on high,
we praise you and worship you
in all your glory.

We praise you that you have power and authority
over all things, in heaven and on earth.
We bow down before you now in worship,
submitting our lives to you,
and seeking your presence with us.

Be with us Lord as we read your word together
and reflect on your message for us today.
Hear us Lord as we offer you prayers

for ourselves and for others.

Fill us Lord with your Holy Spirit as we go
about the work of your Kingdom in our community.

We know Lord you have authority over all things.
Release us Lord from the power of sin and temptation
in our lives.

Remove all difficulties and obstacles that lie before us.
Rescue us from all that seeks to harm or defeat us.

In this time of worship,
may we ascend to the heights with you,
and sit awhile in your presence,
to glimpse something of your glory,
and to be surrounded by your love.
Amen

Ascension Day Dramatic Reading Sam Hargreaves. Based on Acts 1.

Whoosh! Just like that! Like a rocket, Zooooom, that's how he went! Better than any fireworks I've ever seen! Wheeeee! And we were watching to see where he was going when a cloud came across, and, well, that was it. Gone. Ascended.

I didn't want him to go. He'd already left us once, and that was awful. We just didn't know what to do with ourselves, we moped around, fearful for our lives, fearful for our sanity. I mean, he was our hope, we'd left everything for him. And he had promised that he would never leave us or forsake us. So when he died, what did that mean? Wasn't he who we thought he was? Was he a fake or a fool, or even a fiend? So many questions and doubts. We needed him, he was showing us the way, the way to be human, to live without the legalism of the Pharisees or the rule of the Romans. But it was just those things, the rules and the rule, which caused his death. I just didn't understand.

Then he came back. He came back! Who has ever come back from the dead! (Well, except Lazarus, and that little girl, and... er, well, perhaps I should have trusted him a bit more.) Anyway he rose again just like he said he would. And he gave us convincing proofs he was alive, showing us his wounds and eating fish and everything! I mean, ghosts don't eat fish, do they? And he spoke to us about the Kingdom of God, and it all started to make sense, all that stuff we'd heard before but hadn't really grasped until, well, until he'd died I guess.

One time when we were eating he said "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

I got all excited and said "Lord, Lord are you are this time going to restore the Kingdom of Israel?"

He looked at me in his way which means "you haven't quite got it yet, have you?" I'm getting used to that look.

He said "It's not for you to know the times and dates the Father has set for his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Whoooosh! Zoookoom! Gone! Ascended. Before I'd even had chance to ask him what he was going on about. And we are all standing there looking up into the sky like a load of ninnies, when we hear a voice

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?" Fair question I guess. They must not have seen the Whoosh! But now I think about it they did look pretty amazing themselves, all white and shiny, like people from heaven.

They said "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

I looked at my watch and was about to ask if they could give an estimated time of return, but they had already gone.

So here we are back in Jerusalem. We are praying and waiting, waiting and praying, and I can't say I'm not excited about the coming of the Holy Spirit, whatever that might be. But to be honest I'd rather Jesus came back himself. I need him. No one knows me like he does. No one shows me God like he does. But I guess even more than that the world needs him. Israel needs to be restored, God's Kingdom needs to come to this world, and Jesus is the only one to do it, I really believe that. But I'm worried that not one Jesus would be enough, its like we need God to send maybe 100 or 1000 little Jesus', going around and spreading his Kingdom. Little Christs, empowered to do his work. We can't do it, we are useless. Come on God, we need your help!

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Reading: Psalm 1

Prayer of confession

Creator God, as we draw ever nearer to Pentecost, we remember that in the beginning, the earth was 'formless and empty, and that darkness was over the surface of the deep.' But we remember too that You

were present and that Your creative Spirit was on the startling line, ready to go.

And so we praise You that out of nothing You brought everything into being and that through Your spirit, we have order and not chaotic nothingness. as we lift our gaze to the stars, and as we marvel at the beauty of delicate spring flowers, with thankful hearts we rejoice in all that is; in all that You have given.

But we acknowledge the darkness of our own lives and our need for the light of Christ, ministered by the Spirit. Forgive us, we pray, our self-centredness, our fractiousness, our greed and all that is contrary to Your will for our lives. For a healing touch, we pray, and for a deep sense of assurance that Your love for us made known in Jesus is sufficient.

In the days to come, grant us an inner hunger for deeper communion with You and that we might delight all the more in Your living word. Might we be like 'trees planted by streams of water, which yields fruit in season.'

These and all our prayers we offer in Jesus' name, Amen.

(Right Rev Dr Martin Fair, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland)

Hymn: R&S 264 He is Lord, he is Lord

He Is Lord; He Is Lord

He Has Risen From The Dead And He Is Lord,
Every Knee Shall Bow, Every Tongue Confess
That Jesus Christ Is Lord.

He Is love; He Is love

He has shown us by his cross that he is love;
all his people sing with one voice of joy
That Jesus Christ Is love.

He Is life; He Is life

He has died to set us free and he is life;
And he calls us all to love evermore,
That Jesus Christ Is life.

He Is Lord; He Is Lord

He Has Risen From The Dead And He Is Lord,
Every Knee Shall Bow, Every Tongue Confess
That Jesus Christ Is Lord.

Anon

Readings: John 17:6-19

Sermon

It was Ascension Day on Thursday, and our readings for today do not include the actual account of the Ascension. But we are left today to reflect on those disciples who are left behind, gazing up to heaven,

wondering what to do next. We are going to look again at what Jesus says in our gospel reading today, to understand a little more what the Ascension means for us today. We might recognise something of ourselves in those disciples who still look to the heavens, looking for inspiration and waiting for Jesus to come back and show us what to do and sort things out for us.

One of my favourite stories, that's not in the bible, is a legend that recounts the time just after Jesus ascension into heaven, when he returns bearing the marks of his earthly pilgrimage, with its cruel cross and shameful death.

The angel Gabriel approaches Jesus and says "Master, you must have suffered terribly for people down there."

"I did" said Jesus

"And" continued Gabriel, "do they know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?"

"No" said Jesus, "Not yet. Right now, only a handful of people in Israel know."

Gabriel was perplexed "Then what have you done," he asked, "to let all people know about your love for them?"

"Well, I have asked Peter James and John and few others to tell people about Me. Those who are told will in turn tell others and the gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately all of humankind will hear about Me and what I have done on their behalf."

Gabriel frowned and looked skeptical. He knew people weren't dependable "Yes," he said, "but what if Peter, James and John grow weary? What if the people who come after forget? And what if, way down in the 20th and 21st centuries, people get too busy to bother telling others about you; haven't you made any other plans?" And Jesus answered "No, I have no other plans Gabriel, I am counting on them."

The passage from the gospel, is among Jesus last words to the disciples before he is arrested, as he tries to explain to them what will happen in the time after his death. And I want to just reflect on three things that Jesus says this morning, as we hear Jesus words to his disciples and to us, here this morning.

"I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you." (John 17:11)

There is a stone memorial in the Chapel of the Ascension at the top of the Mount of Olives which marks the spot of Jesus final footprint. And since the 4th Century a church has stood on that spot to sanctify this footprint that marks Jesus' last moments on earth.

And I find that last footprint fascinating. If you look carefully, you can perhaps make out the shape of the indentation in the rock that might resemble a partial footprint. As if that last step that Jesus took on earth

was so momentous that it has actually made an indent on the rock, of the Mount of Olives.

But its also fascinating that this spot is marking Jesus last moments on earth. And when we read the story of the Ascension we can quite easily believe that God has left the world. God in Jesus has come, done what had to be done, and then returned to the safety of heaven.

But I think the account of the Ascension has much more significance and meaning than just that Jesus went home. Many have argued over the centuries about what it means for Jesus to return to heaven. It becomes important in our theology. The Sacramentarians argued that if Christ has ascended to heaven and is now restricted to that place then Christ's body and blood could not be present in the sacrament we share in communion.

Johannes Brenz was a Lutheran reformer who was widely-known and respected in the sixteenth century. In one of his sermons he argues that Christ ascends into heaven that he might fill all things. That Jesus presence goes beyond human understanding, so that Christ is "outside of, within, above, and below all places, both in heaven and on earth." While Christ is present everywhere, this presence is no longer visible. The ascension into heaven is the end of Christ's time of living visibly with his disciples on earth. His presence with the church on earth now is invisible.

And I like to think that when Jesus is lifted up into heaven, then this is more of a significant elevation than just going up on a cloud. Jesus becomes elevated in other ways so that he becomes so much more than he was before. For me the ascension celebrates not that Jesus has abandoned the world leaving only a footprint in the dirt, but because he has shaken off the restrictions of his physical existence so today we experience him more fully, in an enhanced way, in a new more intimate way.

"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name." (John 17:11)

Although Jesus leaves the disciples, he prays the Father's protection for them. He says just as I have protected them while I was with them, then Father protect them now I am no longer with them.

But when we consider fate of those disciples, we wonder whether Jesus prayer did any good. Andrew, Philip and Simon were crucified, Peter was crucified upside down, Bartholomew beaten then crucified, James, Matthias and Judas (not Iscariot) were stoned to death, Thomas and Matthew speared to

death, James was beheaded, and John was unsuccessfully boiled in oil but went on to die of old age.

What does it mean that Jesus prayed for their protection?

Sometimes there is the view that as Christians we live in the world, but that we are protected from the world in some way. That we arrogantly assume that we can be immune to the trouble and suffering of this world because of our prayers.

We hear echoes of this in the Psalm that we shared earlier, it says that those who delight in the law of the Lord are Blessed, are happy. That the Lord watches over the way of the righteous.

But the Psalmist here is not saying that those who follow God's way, life will be a bed of roses, and they will always be happy. Because if anyone should know that's not true - it was those who wrote those very Psalms.

We have this wonderful image of a tree planted by streams of water, and whose leaf does not wither. We live in a country which is blessed by rainfall, where there is water readily available at most of the time during the year, but in the place the Psalmist lived water was scarce.

In a land of drought, the plants are dependent on rain to fall on them in order that they might survive. If rain falls, then they will flourish. If it does not rain, they will dry up and wither. And the psalmist says that that is how it is in many peoples' lives.

When times are good they are fine, and they might even seem to be happy and blessed. They seem to have it all. But I am sure that we all know, and have seen, how temporary that happiness can be. That when blessing are raining down on them everything is great, but when things start to dry up, then things can hit rock bottom. When times are hard, they wither and dry up.

But the psalmist says: "Those who delight in the law of the Lord, are like a tree planted by streams of water which yield fruit in season." The psalmist says instead, those who remain faithful to God, are like a plant that is planted by a stream. Because whether it rains, or whether it is dry, they will prosper, for they receive what they need. That as people of faith, we will face good times and bad, just as anyone else does, but because we are rooted in that life giving water, we will prosper and not wither no matter what happens to us in the world.

This I think is the kind of protection that Jesus prays for his disciples. Not an escape from the trials of the world as we retreat into some heavenly realm.

Another of the reformers, Martin Luther, sees this in relation to the Ascension. In that Jesus' ascension means he is above all earthly authority. Martin Luther writes "If you believe in Christ, then the text says that you believe that he sits above, and that he has taken captive my captivity, that is, my sin. In what way? It should not terrify me before God.... I believe in him who is above, who has captured sin. Therefore I know no other sin than sin that is captive, that is now condemned before God and in the end will be beheaded. ... You [sin] wish to lead me into despair and sadness, presumption, and idolatry. But you no longer have power. You have been taken captive. Your tyranny and dominion are ended. Nor should ... I do evil things, be proud, hateful, or jealous, but I tread these underfoot."

Here Luther recognises the Ascension as proof of Christ's authority over all things. So that though we live with sin and all the suffering that entails, we are no longer captive to its power over us. Free in Christ, we can mock sin and stand against its temptations because Christ has led sin into captivity by his ascension.

**"They are not of the world, even as I am not of it."
(John 17:16)**

So despite what we say about Christ's presence in the world, despite his ascension.

And our very real presence in a world of suffering and sin, despite God's ongoing protection.

Here Jesus says, we are not of the world, just as he is not of it.

I have here a bottle of water which has some oil in it. You will notice the oil is sitting on top of the water. It does this because they are two very distinct substances.

But if I shake the bottle vigorously, you will see that the water and the oil become indistinguishable. However we know that there are two very distinct and substances in the bottle, because as we leave the liquid to settle, we know the water and the oil will separate again, and slowly the oil will rise to the surface.

Perhaps this is a good illustration of what it means to be in the world, but not of the world. That though our life is indistinguishable from the life of the world, in nature we have become something different. We are made holy. Set apart. And in time we will return, we will ascend as our different natures become apparent.

Johannes Brenz talks of our own ascension and how Christ has also led us to heaven. He asks: how can this be? We know that the disciples were left on the mountain, looking up to the sky as the cloud hid Jesus. We know that we are still in the world, and suffer and are tempted by worldly things. Brenze reflects on what

Paul says in Colossians : “Your life is hidden in Christ with God” (Colossians 3:3). Christ, the head of the church, has ascended. We, the members of his body, have ascended with him. But our ascension with Christ is now hidden.

Just as Christ is present invisibly in our world. Just as the oil is invisible in the water. So too our own ascension is hidden. Brenz goes on to say, that because we have ascended with Christ, because we are elevated in this way, we have power over the troubles that we face in the world. He writes: “Our reign in Christ above gives us hope in times of trouble. Those troubles have been led captive by Christ. We reign over them. There will come a time when Christ and our victory will be made visible for us.

We are set apart from the world, and we must be distinct from it. Like light and salt we are to colour and flavour the world by being in it. We must be distinct, so that the world may see the truth which we hold, and as we mix with the world, then we colour the world with the truth of the word. We are God's plan for this world. He has no plan B. It is our action in the world, as people of the truth, which will fulfil God's purpose. We are to be salt, flavouring the world, and light, bringing God's colours to the world.

It is from those first apostles, that band of disciples who stood gazing open mouthed into the sky, that we take up our part as the body of Christ and continue to spread that truth until all of human kind hear about Jesus and his love for the world.

We pray that by our action in the world, Jesus may be glorified through us, his kingdom built, and his work of salvation completed.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray to our heavenly Father,
knowing his love for us.

Father we want to live your way
and do your will,
offer you true worship,
and serve one another in love.
Empower your Church to do this we pray,
live in us; transform us.

Silence

Lord we wait on you
fill us, Holy Spirit of God.

Father we want our communities and our country
to display your love and truth, justice and mercy.
We want to break down walls of prejudice
and build bridges of reconciliation and trust.

Empower your world, we pray;
live in us; transform us.

Silence

Lord we wait on you
fill us, Holy Spirit of God.

Father, we want our children
to be safe and lovingly nurtured,
our elderly valued,
our homes to be places of welcome and warmth;
empower your people, we pray:
live in us; transform us.

Silence

Lord we wait on you
fill us, Holy Spirit of God.

Father, we want your healing
for those whose lives are aching and weary;
your comfort and reassurance
for all who are imprisoned by fears and hate;
empower these lives we pray;
live in us; transform us.

Silence

Lord we wait on you
fill us, Holy Spirit of God.

Father we commit our loved ones,
who have died, into your safe keeping forever.
Prepare us all, Father, to live with you in heaven.

Silence

Lord we wait on you
fill us, Holy Spirit of God.

Father we want to worship and praise you
with our voices and our lives;
shape us to your purpose, and use us.

(Susan Sayers – “Living Stones”)

Accept these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our
risen and ascended Lord,
who taught us to say together:

The Lord's Prayer

The ascension of Jesus marked both the end of the
beginning, and the beginning of the end. As the
completion of the Resurrection of the Lord, it was the
final act, the final proof of his victory over sin and
death, a victory in which all who are in Christ, are
included through their faith in him.

The return of the eternal Son of God to his place of
authority was the necessary condition for the beginning

of the age of the Spirit and beyond that the final fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. It marked the very end of the 'Acts of the Son of Man in the body' and the very beginning of the "Acts of the Son through his Body the Church" - not just the 'Acts of the Apostles' but the 'Acts of you and me'

Our prayerful response to the Ascension is not just about what Jesus the great high priest can now do for us, but also what he can and will do *through* us.

ST THERESA'S PRAYER

Christ has no body now but yours
No hands, no feet on earth but yours
Yours are the eyes through which He looks
Compassion on this world
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good
Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world
Yours are the hands
Yours are the feet
Yours are the eyes
You are His body
Christ has no body now on earth but yours

Dear Lord,
We eagerly wait for the end of the story when you have promised
to return and make all things new. In the meantime,
send your promised Holy Spirit to equip us
to be your hands and feet on earth.
Amen

Hymn: R&S 262 Crown him with many crowns

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
of him who died for thee,
and hail him as thy chosen king
through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God,
before the worlds began:
and ye, who tread where he hath trod,
crown him the Son of Man;
who every grief hath known
that wrings the human breast,
and takes and bears the for his own,
that all in him may rest.

Crown him the Lord of life,
who triumphed o'er the grave,
and rose victorious in the strife
for those he came to save;
his glories now we sing
who died and rose on high,

who died eternal life to bring,
and lives that death may die.

Crown him the Lord of love,
Behold his hands and side
Rich wounds, yet visible above
in beauty glorified.
all hail, Redeemer, hail,
for thou hast died for me;
Thy praise shall never, never fail
throughout eternity!
Matthew Bridges altd.
Godfrey Thring

Blessing