

Luke 24.44-53

Acts 1.1-11

Today we're coming to the end of the Easter season. Or maybe you could say we've finished it. We're thinking about the transition:

Incarnation, resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost.

Jesus' original disciples knew him as an earthly figure that they followed. One they had gradually come to see as part of God. So his death at an early age shocked them. We see them meeting in fear in a locked room. But then, Jesus began to appear to them in various ways, both individually and in groups. In today's first reading, from the book of Acts, Jesus has told the disciples that they were not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait. You can imagine they could easily have become disillusioned over that time and drifted off. But they did stay together, and we're told of one final appearance which assured them that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now. And that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.

And, while they were watching, Jesus was lifted up and taken off in a cloud. A classic picture of the Ascension. I can just imagine his legs appearing at eye height as he disappears upwards. Actually, there's a chapel at Walsingham in England which has a sculpture of Jesus' feet going up into the ceiling.

But the first chapter of Acts is much less concerned with what is happening to Jesus than what is about to happen in the lives of the earliest Christians. It isn't about removing Jesus from human experience – 'the last thing we saw was his feet' – but allowing his presence to infuse all of human experience. It's not Jesus going upwards but outwards.

After the Ascension, Jesus' presence will be experienced differently. It will be known in fellowship meals, the reading of scripture and the recall of his teaching. A spiritual presence rather than a physical one. A transition from their original world to ours.

A couple of weeks ago Christina went to a diocesan sustainability workshop. The main speaker mentioned the creation stories in Genesis – how there were two different versions – one in chapter 1 and another in chapter 2. There's definite contrasts between the two stories. In the first, God speaks, and it happens. When it's finished, humankind is instructed to fill the earth and subdue it.

In the second, God is shown as acting in *conjunction* with humankind. When God first made the earth, there were no plants or trees. The reason – there was no rain, and no one to till the soil. There was a need for divine work *and* human work. God is a farmer and so are humans. We are called to sustain life in the world around us. (Quoted from my sermon Creation 2, 15 September 2024).

You might be wondering what this has to do with Ascension. I see it as part of that transition from the ministry of the earthly Jesus to the ministry of the church as God's people. At the Ascension, Jesus is handing his work to his disciples. And not just the disciples at that time but also to the church now.

Next week we see the final stage in that transition when we celebrate Pentecost. When the disciples receive the Holy Spirit and the power that is promised.

In today's gospel reading we get a hint of the work. The proclamation of repentance bringing forgiveness of sins. Last week the message was love. And we're familiar with texts like 'God is love'. Has the message changed over the week? Maybe not.

We can think what a life of perfect love looks like, but can we live it? We know we can't. But repentance can mean recognising that we haven't lived up to that perfect love and knowing that God forgives us. Repentance and forgiveness, and a chance to try again. Not just regret and depression.

But repentance and forgiveness are not just between us and God, but between people. Think how often in life people get it wrong. Repentance involves being able to acknowledge our mistakes, and letting others acknowledge theirs. With forgiveness to follow.

Tom Wright looks at today's world: full of disputes, large and small. Nations, ethnic groups, political factions, tribes and economic alliances all struggling for supremacy. Tom suggests that a study of the complicated history of these conflicts shows it's not possible to lay all the blame on one side. The only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness. He goes on to mention the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. [Luke for Everyone, p. 301f]. Surely this is the way of love.

The Ascension marks the change from relying on God in Jesus to do it all, to realising that we need to work in partnership. Just as the early Christians realised.