

Sunday 17 May – Sunday after Ascension Day

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Ascension day, coming exactly forty days after Easter, falls on a Thursday. Perhaps it is for this reason and because unlike Christmas it is not a bank holiday (in this country), it has tended to be something of a neglected festival. When the Revised Common Lectionary was produced even the Sunday after Ascension day was changed to "the seventh Sunday of Easter", so it would be entirely possible for church members not even to notice that there is such a festival (not here at St. Lukes where happily we have a Thursday eucharist so there is always a service on Ascension day). It is also, for some, a problematic story from the Bible. For a start, although it directly concerns Jesus (it is His moment of departure) it is not included in any of the Gospels but is only found in the Book of Acts. Theologians have also struggled with the idea of Jesus ascending in to heaven, indeed John Robinson begins his seminal work "Honest to God" with the assertion that it is impossible to take the ascension account literally. Others have similarly suggested that it is difficult to glean a "nucleus of genuine history" from Acts 1.

Sermons that I have heard on the Ascension have generally followed a non-literal approach, suggesting that the language of 'heaven and earth', though it could be used to denote sky on the one hand and terra firma on the other, was regularly employed in a sophisticated theological manner, to denote the parallel and interlocking universes inhabited by the creator god on the one hand and humans on the other. The other point frequently made about the ascension is that it is effectively the reversal of the incarnation, I have even heard it described as "Christmas-backwards day" when Jesus went from being incarnate and was somehow re-absorbed back into the Godhead.

This leaves us with something of a problem however, for John's Gospel talks of the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us but has nothing to say about the Word then ceasing to be flesh again and no-longer dwelling with us. Our Eucharist services continue to celebrate Jesus body (given for us) and His blood (shed for us) in a very material way just as Jesus commanded us to do. Shying away from the

Ascension would also not accord with our historic creeds. We will say, immediately after this sermon that:

"he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

In fact the Ascension is included in all of the historic creeds of the Church, the Apostles creed, the Nicene creed, and the creed of Saint Athanasius. It's that important and is a central tenet of our faith. So, as it is so important and was so important to the Church fathers, we should really consider why that is so.

The first point that I would like to make here is about that other central tenet of our faith, that Jesus was born as a human being. The incarnation, which literally means "made of flesh", is how God bridged the chasm between earth and heaven. It is wrong, indeed it is an historic heresy, to suggest that Jesus was anything other than fully human. He lived a life exactly as we do. In the Gospels we read about Him eating and drinking, feeling thirst, hunger, pain, and sadness at the death of a friend. After the resurrection Jesus still has a body of flesh and blood, Thomas is able to see and touch the wounds in His hands, feet and side. The disciples in Emmaus walk and talk with Him along the road then sit down to a meal with Him. In the Ascension Jesus returns as a human to the Father, hence in the creeds He is seated at the right hand of the Father. The chasm between earth and heaven remains bridged. When Jesus says in John chapter 14 that He goes ahead to prepare a place for us, that is literally what happens in the Ascension, and where He goes, we shall follow.

Second, in Acts 1 Jesus tells the disciples that they are to receive the Holy Spirit. Again, from John chapter 14, Jesus tells the disciples about the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in His name so that we are not left orphaned. The Holy Spirit lives within us and teaches us everything and reminds us of all that Jesus said. In John 16:7 Jesus tells the disciples that:

"But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." John 16:7

In a few days time we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at the festival of Pentecost. Many people consider Pentecost to be the birthday of the Church.

Which brings me to my third and final point about the Ascension. God's plan for creation was not that Jesus should be resurrected then remain with the disciples as their leader for eternity. Creation must be redeemed, and it is the Church that must continue Christ's work on earth. We are to be "the body of Christ", as St. Teresa of Avila tells us:

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now."

This might sound daunting, but she also said:

"Let nothing disturb you, nothing frighten you. All things pass. God does not change. Patience achieves everything. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices."

Amen.