

THE ASCENSION

Acts 1:1-11

Our reading today first of all looks back to Luke's gospel and to the resurrection of Christ which had taken place on Easter Sunday and then deals with his return to be with His Father in glory in what is usually referred to as the Ascension. So as we study this passage together you can find the main text of the reading on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's start by looking at verses 1-3:

“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” (verses 1-3)

Luke had dedicated his gospel to Theophilus (Luke 1:3) – which interestingly means "loved by God" or "lover of God" – who was probably a Roman official, and here again he dedicates his second book, the book of Acts, to him.

The implication of Luke's words in verse 1 is that his second volume, the book of Acts, will be an account of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach after his ascension – no longer through his visible presence on earth but by his Spirit in his followers. The expression “to do and teach” wonderfully sums up what the four gospels are all about: they all record *The Work and Words of Jesus*.

Over a period of forty days between his resurrection and ascension Jesus appeared at intervals to his apostles and other followers in a manner which could leave no doubt in their minds, or indeed in our minds if we listen to all the evidence, that he was really alive again –

risen from the dead. The earliest list of these appearances is that given by Paul (1 Corinthians 15: 5-7), but that was by no means comprehensive. A fairly comprehensive list from all the scriptural material is displayed on the screen:

- To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11, 18)
- To the women (Matthew 28:9-10)
- To Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- To the ten disciples (Luke 24:36-40; John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the eleven disciples (John 20:24-29)
- To the eleven disciples in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
- To five hundred followers (1 Corinthians 15:6; Matthew 28:16-20)
- To James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- And to the disciples at the Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-8)

These experiences were not visionary – all the disciples appear to have experienced exactly the same thing! Also the risen Christ ate in the presence of the disciples (Luke 24:42-43). Furthermore, the sudden courage displayed by Peter and the other disciples in proclaiming the “Good News”, as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts can only be explained on the basis that they underwent a real life changing experience the truth of which was absolutely convincing to them. They braved arrest (Acts 5:18), flogging (Acts 5:40) and even death (Acts 7:58). What a transformation from the band of men who had cravenly fled at Jesus’ arrest and had not even dared to attend his crucifixion. I believe it is also significant that Jesus’ brothers became followers and believers after the resurrection. We know that these things happened, otherwise Christianity would never have spread so rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and indeed through the whole of the then known world.

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God: it “drew near” with the inception of his public ministry as we saw when we looked at Mark chapter 1 (Mark 1:14-15) and was released in power by his death and resurrection as we see in Mark chapter 9. He also taught that he would return to judge the world at the last day. So in verse 3, when

Jesus spoke of "the kingdom of God", this is what he was teaching about. This would have been what the apostles taught when they proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God – the same good news as Jesus himself had announced earlier, but now given effective fulfilment by the saving events of his passion and triumph. I'm sure that the teaching Jesus gave to the apostles during the 40 days of his post-resurrection appearances was calculated to make plain to them the bearing of these saving events on the message of the kingdom.

So there's lots of evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead, that the resurrection was a real historical event – and clearly if Jesus had not been brought back to life his ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit couldn't have been real either. So let's move on to look at verses 4-8:

“On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "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." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by 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."” (verses 4-8)

Jesus had promised the gift of the Holy Spirit in his last teachings to the disciples in the upper room immediately before his arrest and he re-iterates that promise here – possibly in his last teaching immediately before his ascension. Evidently the disciples still retained some belief that Jesus was going to restore earthly power to the Israelites, judging by their question in verse 6. Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay, as Calvin said it contained as many errors as words. Anyway, Jesus responded gently, he didn't give them a direct "no" – he just told them that all such things were within the sole authority of the Father. Whatever purposes of his own God might have for the nation of Israel, these were not to be the concern of the apostles as the messengers of Christ. The kingdom of

God which they were commissioned to proclaim was the good news of God's grace in Christ, not any earthly kingdom. In a sense this was to be the true restored Israel, fulfilling its mission to be a light for the Gentiles. Anyway, this exchange plus the coming ascension, seems to have cleared the apostles minds of their preoccupation with earthly kingdoms. From now on they would fearlessly proclaim the gospel Christ had taught them.

Instead of the earthly power which at least some of the apostles had once sought (Mark 10: 35-45, Luke 22: 24-27), a power far greater and nobler was about to be given them in their anointing with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. As Jesus had been anointed at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and power, so his followers were now to be similarly anointed and enabled to carry on his work, a work of bearing witness to him throughout the world – to the ends of the earth. Formerly the apostles had experienced the Holy Spirit through the presence of Jesus, after Pentecost the disciples would experience Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit is an essential part of our Christian ministry and Jesus must be our focus. As L. Keck says: "The less Jesus is the core of witness, the less power we have."

It's no accident that the ministry of spreading the gospel was to begin in Jerusalem. The story of Jesus led *to* Jerusalem and the cross; the story of the church led *from* Jerusalem proclaiming the crucifixion.

Let's now finally move on to the ascension in verses 9-11:

"After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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." (verses 9-11)

Once Jesus had made his commission sufficiently clear to the apostles he vanished from their sight and no further post-resurrection

appearances were granted to them. Earlier on (verse 3) Luke referred to these appearances taking place over a period of 40 days – which of course is where we arrive at the 40 day gap between the Resurrection and the Ascension – between Easter Sunday and Ascension – in the Christian calendar. Luke ended his gospel with a brief account of the ascension. That account contains less detail than the account in our reading from Acts, but we shouldn't see any conflict between the two or imagine that Luke is somehow proposing two ascensions as some writers have sought to do. In Acts Luke is simply taking up the account where he left off in his gospel including a little more detail than he included in his gospel. Luke's account reads like a factual account of an historical event – and that's exactly what it is.

But, we need to be clear that this wasn't the first sign of Jesus' exaltation after the resurrection. For example, earlier Jesus had disappeared from the sight of the disciples he had spoken with on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31) and he appeared to the disciples in a locked room (John 20:26). From the time of the resurrection Jesus' "body of glory" now belonged to a new order and the post-resurrection appearances were the exception rather than the norm. What happened was that on the fortieth day these appearances finally came to an end.

We also need to be clear that the ascension wasn't an isolated event. On the cross Jesus Christ shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sins, on the third day he was raised from the dead, he conquered sin and death and showed that he was who and what he'd always said he was. At the ascension Christ returned to the Father in glory, the glory that he'd voluntarily laid aside for our sake at his incarnation. These three events are all linked, they are all part of Christ's atonement for our sins.

Going back to our text, the words a cloud hid him from their sight in verse 9 remind us of the transfiguration when a cloud overshadowed them and also of Jesus words about his second coming Mark 13:26: “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” (Mark 13:26 NIV)

and Mark 14:62:

““I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.””
(Mark 14:62 NIV)

In all these cases we should see the cloud not as a normal cloud in the sky, but as the cloud which envelops the glory of God – the *shekinah* glory – that cloud which, resting above the tabernacle and filling Solomon’s temple, was the visible token to Israel that the divine glory had taken up residence there (Exodus 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10–11). So, in the last moment of Jesus' presence upon this earth, the apostles saw their Lord in a special way – Jesus was enveloped in the cloud of the divine presence.

We shouldn't see this image of Jesus ascending into the sky as implying that heaven is somewhere in outer space. But, we should completely accept the ascension as a real historical event along with the crucifixion and resurrection. Luke is the only gospel writer to give a full account of it, but according to John's gospel Jesus himself referred to his ascension when speaking to Mary Magdalene. Peter in his Pentecost sermon speaks of Jesus having been ‘exalted to the right hand of God’ as something different from and subsequent to his resurrection (Acts 2: 31-36), and he confirms it in his first letter. Paul frequently writes of the exaltation of Jesus to the supreme place of honour and power, and distinguishes it from his resurrection. So the ascension is thoroughly scriptural and reads like a factual account, even if it does sound strange to us. We should fully and unreservedly accept it as a real historical event. I believe Jesus chose to leave in this unusual way to show to the apostles – and to us – that his leaving was permanent until that day when he shall come again.

In any event, Luke doesn't dwell on the ascension, he immediately shifts the focus back to earth and the angelic witnesses. Moments of high spiritual experience are never ends in themselves. It was time to come down from the mountain and witness to what they had seen. The angelic rebuke to the apostles – “why do you stand staring” – was followed by a promise: “This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” It was a strong

affirmation of Jesus' return – not just a promise but a reality made real and affirmed by the ascension they had just witnessed. So, the angelic witnesses told the apostles that there was no point in standing staring into the sky – Jesus was and is gone until that day when he shall come again.

There's no point in us staring into the sky either. Until that day which is known to no man – and indeed not even to Jesus (Matthew 24:36) – when he will return; we must carry on that commission which was given to the apostles and has been passed on to us to proclaim and spread the gospel to the ends of the earth – not forgetting here on the Cote d'Azur. We pray *maranatha* come Lord Jesus come, but until he comes we work in his name carrying on the commission to spread the good news about Jesus, a commission which he gave nearly 2,000 years ago. Each and every one of us has been given the gift of salvation by the grace of God, but that salvation is given so that it may be shared.