

Otley Parish Church – 12th May 2024

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension Day

I owe you all a shorter sermon today.

I want to thank Eric for a great teach last week on the Holy Spirit,

But he was also not the briefest last week.

So I am determined that this week is shorter.

Let's see!

As I have said, we begin our walk through the Acts of the Apostles this week

And each week we will look at a passage

from each of the chapters of Acts.

We're not going to cover all the verses in each chapter,

but I encourage you to read the whole chapter before coming to church,

And indeed the whole book several times

over the course of the next few months.

There are only 18,450 words in it so you'll need about 1 1/4 hours.

It is amazing the difference it makes

to read not just a little snippet,

But to go through and take the whole thing in in one go.

Today's passage from chapter 1 is about the ascension of Jesus into the heavens.

It was Ascension Day on Thursday,

Which marks the beginning of the season of prayer we call Thy Kingdom Come.

The 9 days between Jesus' ascension

And the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Which we will celebrate next Sunday.

Eric has nicely primed us for this whole season with his teaching last week,

And I am consciously leaning back onto all that he taught us last week

And am not going to attempt to repeat anything he said.

Please do go home and re-watch his message on the YouTube channel.

I'm limiting myself this week to the statement of some profound truths about Jesus ascension

That I want, and that Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, wants

to be the framing of everything we learn about

as we make our way through the book of Acts.

A key word for this whole passage is fulfilment.

The Holy Spirit is going to come in fulfilment of a promise.

“Wait”, Jesus tells the Apostles,
For the gift my Father promised...
For you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.
Now, our minds go in a certain direction when we hear that,
But the disciples were not thinking of the birth of the church
But of the fulfilment of the earthly Kingdom of Israel.

And the reason that’s where their minds went,
is that all throughout scripture
God is revealed as the promise maker,
And the promise keeper.
And his promises reflect his plan.
Which Paul describes in Ephesians 1.10 as
a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on
earth.
Or as the NIV puts it:
to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

That’s his plan.
He made this world,
And it has become alienated from him
Sin has torn us apart from God,
It has destroyed the union and peace between us and God,
And between the different human tribes.
All human relationships are affected by sin.
And God is heartbroken
And determined to restore the unity ...of all things ... in heaven ... and on earth.
He is determined that heaven should once more be united with earth.
And he will reunite heaven and earth,
He will heal the earth,
And deal with sin, the devil, with evil and suffering, through Christ.
Now, this Christ, or Messiah – the chosen one,
anointed by God with the Holy Spirit,
Was promised all throughout scripture.
Both in covenants and in words of prophecy.

Let’s run through a few of them:
In Genesis, after sin enters into the human story
God tells the serpent, a symbol of the Devil,

That I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”
God promises to deal with the devil and with sin,
Right from the very beginning
through a man, the off-spring of Eve.
And so, ever after the followers of God
awaited his appointed serpent crusher.

Isaiah also prophesies about the Messiah in chapter 7 and 9 when he says the famous words:

*“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign:
Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son,
and she will call His name Immanuel.
For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;*

The thread of promise continues to unspool
In God’s covenant with King David,
who wanted to build God a temple or house of bricks and mortar.
However, God says David is not going to be the one to build him a house,
His son Solomon will do that
But God graciously turns the tables on David’s offer
And promises to build him a house.
Not of bricks and mortar, but of descendants.
I will raise up your offspring to succeed you,
your own flesh and blood,
and I will establish his kingdom.
He is the one who will build a house for my Name,
and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.
I will be his father, and he will be my son.
God is clearly not referring to a normal human being,
He is not referring to Solomon who whose temple would last a mere 500 years.
He is referring to his own Son.
One who will rule forever.

The end of the Isaiah’s prophecy, which we just looked
says this:

*He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

There's one of my favourites, from Zechariah 3.8-9:

*Listen O High Priest Joshua and your associates seated before you,
who are men symbolic of things to come:
I am going to bring my servant the Branch.
See the stone I have set in front of Joshua!
... and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.*

That was written 500 year before Christ.

Zechariah picks up from Jeremiah
and predicts more about the coming Branch of David,
as Jeremiah calls him.

And Joshua, is a variant of the name Yeshua,
the Aramaic name of Jesus.

And Zechariah says that the Joshua of his day
was symbolic of the Branch,
and this Branch would remove the sin of the land in one single day.

The day Jesus (Yeshua) died he
did so for the sins of all people.

So literally, in a single day the sins of the land were removed.

Jesus' name and victory over sin
were predicted 500 years before he lived.

And so, Jesus is described as a Son of David in 41 verses in the NT,
and Matthew and Luke's different genealogies both attest to this.

Matthew gives us Jesus genealogy through adoption in Joseph,
who is descended from David,

And Luke gives us his mother's genealogy

Attesting that through her he is by blood a son of David.

God's promise that a son of David,

Who would be raised up to build a temple for him,

who will be a king forever,
is fulfilled in Jesus.
But it is not a political or earthly kingdom,
but an eternal kingdom of God.
It is a truly lasting kingdom,
something an earthly king could never achieve.
But please don't hear that it is only a spiritual Kingdom.
Remember, Paul tells us God's plan is
to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.
To restore the perfect harmony and total union
Between the spiritual and the physical,
Between God and people.

This is what I meant two weeks ago,
when I spoke about the church's reason for being.
That we are, as God's Holy people,
to be the worthy Bride of Jesus.
We are to be united with him,
we are to be with him.

So, often we live our Christian lives
without a strong vision of the purpose for which we were made.
Of the end of time, when history will be brought to a conclusion,
when there will be judgement, resurrection,
And the complete fulfilment of God's promises to Jesus:
The creation of a worthy bride for his precious Son Jesus
Who by his blood has redeemed us, bought us back,
from the condemnation that we deserved.

But what difference will or should this make for our lives now.
Well, next week we will celebrate Pentecost Sunday.
We will remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the first believers.
As we will see, as we track with them throughout the book of Acts,
they went on, led by the Apostles,
to live lives that are, awesome and inspiring in so many ways.
God used them in great and powerful ways to extend his Kingdom.
And their lives are an example for us to follow.
Yes, let's begin to dream a little bigger,
and open our hearts to follow God wherever he will lead us.

These are the end times – and they have been
ever since Jesus ascended to the right hand of the throne of God.
God is drawing all things towards a conclusion
– he is bringing to unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.
And he is calling the church to arise, to wake up.
To do again the things we did when we first fell in love with Jesus.

Are you having a passionate love affair with God?
Are you energised and excited by his presence?
Are you will to suffer for your love of him?
Are you so devoted to him that all other distractions have been set aside?

If not, but you want to want God more,
there is a remedy for your lack of spiritual hunger
and it is two-fold.

First, you need a strong vision.

Here's a ready-made one from the Ephesians reading we heard:

Paul prays

*that God may give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,
so that you may know him better.*

*That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened
in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you,
the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,
and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

*That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted
when he raised Christ from the dead
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,
far above all rule and authority, power and dominion,
and every name that is invoked,
not only in the present age but also in the one to come.
And God placed all things under his feet
and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,
which is his body,
the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

Jesus has ascended,
He is seated at the right hand of the Father.
And from his throne he sent, and continues to send, his Holy Spirit.

With the same incomparable power with which God raised him from the dead.

And the Father has put all his enemies under his feet,
and is drawing history to its conclusion:

the revealing to the world of who ... Jesus ... really is.

There will be judgement for all,

There will be punishment for those who reject him,

And there will be an open door for all who accept him,

Who receive his grace,

into the Marriage Banquet of the Lamb.

That marriage, that banquet,

the joy of finally being united with a worthy bride,

is the joy that is set before Jesus – that is his reward.

That is what kept him persevering

through the suffering of the cross.

And without a strong vision of that

we will not have the motivation for running our own race.

The second remedy that I want to offer for a lack of spiritual hunger,

Is to invite you to think about what is filling you up.

What is quenching your thirst.

If you want to develop a hunger for God,

If you want to enjoy a passionate love affair with the Holy Trinity,

and enter in a life like those we read about in Acts,

you need only turn your attention to him.

You need only stop giving your attention

to the things that blunt your hunger for him.

Ask yourself, how much TV do I watch?

How much social media do I consume?

And by contrast:

how much time do I seek him in prayer?

How much time do I spend praying through the Bible?

If you wonder why Christianity seems a limp and lifeless,

this is a good place to start.

As I close I want to point out a couple of little details

in the story of the ascension we've read this morning.

Did you note the clouds that took Jesus from their sight?

Those clouds are as it were the clouds of incense

offered by the priests in the temple of the old testament.

They are also, as it were, the clouds of the power and glory of God's immediate presence.
So Jesus ascended through, but also into, the clouds,
to take his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
Exalted, triumphant and victorious.

And did you notice the two men that appear
and ask the disciples, what they're doing?
They are clearly two angels,
and are perhaps the same two angels that guard the presence of God
the door keepers of Eden with the flaming sword
that kept Adam and Eve from re-entering the Garden.
We see the same two angels embroidered on the curtain of the temple
and before that the ark of the covenant,
Both Eden, the ark of the covenant, and the temple,
symbolize the dwelling place of God,
the throne room of heaven where Jesus now reigns on high.
But we are no longer being kept out of God's presence
by these two angels.
Because Jesus has become the perfect sacrifice for sin,
and because he now reigns on high,
the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us.
Because he reigns we know that he will come again
and take us to be with him where he is.
Because he reigns we know that he will empower us to do the work he has for us.
Because he reigns we know that he will return,
our merciful redeemer and judge,
and that he will dwell with us and will be our God and we will be his people.

Everything that we will read about in Acts in the weeks and months to come is possible,
only because he now reigns.
So, let that vision fill your mind.
Let his glory fill your mind.
Let the knowledge of his authority over all things calm your fears,
give you courage to obey him in all areas of your life.
As God prepares to restore the unity
of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.
Friends, we were made for a passionate love affair with our God.
Let's get ready for our wedding day.
These are the days of courtship.

These are the days of getting to know each other.

Of falling madly in love.

These are the days of increasing hunger for him.

They days of desire and devotion and preparation.

So let's prepare for that by honouring him in all areas of our life.

Let us not hold back anything for ourselves,

but in the words of words of St Paul

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy,

to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,

holy and pleasing to God,

this is your true and proper worship.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world,

but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

AMEN.