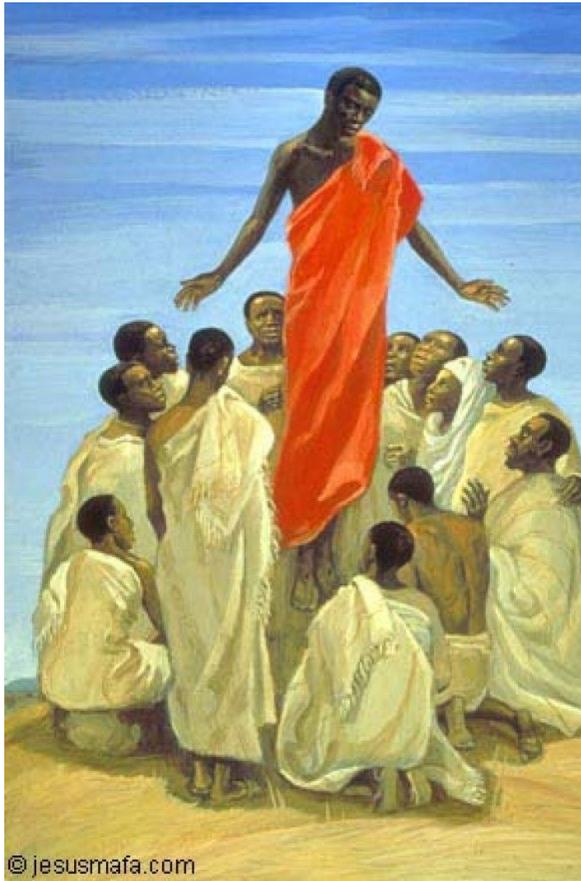


St Swithun's Church Family

Ascension Day

Thursday 21st May 2020



Faith, hope and love

Introduction

Today is Ascension Day. For forty days we have been celebrating with joyful hearts the resurrection of Jesus, his bursting from the tomb and his defeat of the power of sin and death. He appeared to his disciples many times and told them about the kingdom of God.

Today we recall how Jesus left this earth and ascended into heaven.

Today we remember that is now ascended that we, the church, are the body of Christ and it is we who are Jesus' body on earth.

Our mission is to love as Jesus commanded us to love.

The Gathering

God has gone up with a shout,
the Lord with the sound of a trumpet!

Psalm 47.5

In the name of God,
Father son and Holy Spirit
Amen.

The Greeting

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you
and also with you.

Opening Prayer

Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours,
Ours are the eyes which must see with Christ's compassion.
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.
Ours are the hands with which he blesses now.
Amen

Prayer of St Teresa of Avila

Trusting in God's love for all creation let us hear the story of Jesus' parting:

The Ascension Reading

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 1: 4-11

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.



Homily

Richard Evans

What are you waiting for?

In normal times, the words “what are you waiting for?” could be said as an encouragement or with impatience.

In these times of lockdown there is something much more poignant about the question. What are we waiting for today?

Everything seems on hold. We have no idea when life will begin to get back to normal. It seems as if we are in limbo. Things have ended and we are waiting...

The book in the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles starts with the event we celebrate today. It starts with the ascension. The moment when Jesus left his friends alone and disappeared for the last time.

The book of Acts begins with an event which must have seemed like an ending.

Jesus had risen from death forty days beforehand. He had met with his astonished and initially fearful followers several times but on this occasion it was clear that he wasn't going to be around anymore. The amazing joyous resurrection time came to an end. And that is where the story of Acts begins.

The writer tells us that Jesus left the earth and his friends and was taken to heaven. Before he went, Jesus told them to stay put in Jerusalem and wait. He told them that something tremendous was going to happen so that they wondered whether he was about to do something to restore sovereignty to the country. In fact, Jesus said, it was not he that was about to do something tremendous. It was them.

This group of followers who had been scared and hiding and divided just a few weeks before were going to receive power from God so that would be able to tell the world the good news about Jesus. That is what he told them. And then he disappeared from view for the last time.

I wonder how they felt? Were they sad? Or disappointed?
Perhaps it was a bit of an anti-climax.
I expect, like us, they might have felt in limbo.

In the verses that follow on from the end of our reading, we hear that the friends went back into the city as they had been told and stayed together, waiting for what would happen next. Waiting for the beginning of the rest of their lives.

And while they waited they prayed.

Something tremendous did happen. Because from that small group of friends, the world-wide church made up of followers of Jesus grew and spread as Jesus said it would. We are part of that world-wide church because of them.

The ascension marked, not the end but the beginning of a new part of the story. God's intervention in human history through Jesus is still going on. The ascension is the moment when the work to make it known everywhere passed to the disciples of Jesus. There was more to come to help with the job...and that is the story of Pentecost.

We, like those first followers of Jesus come to Ascension Day in a new way this year. The separation and isolation and restrictions of lockdown are affecting everyone. It is painful and fearful. And yet, for many of us the experience has helped us to rediscover or maybe to find out for the first time that Jesus is alive and living with us through these dark times. The love of God is alive amongst the friends of Jesus. Love in the time of Coronavirus.

Our job as followers of Christ is the same as on the first Ascension Day. Hear Jesus as he tells us "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth."

Like those first followers, at the moment that sounds an impractical ambition. We cannot leave our houses; how can we take on a task to reach the ends of the earth with the good news? Like the first disciples, our first response should be prayer.

We read that they returned to their upper room and they spent their time of waiting for the Holy Spirit in prayer. That is why the church designates the time between Ascension and Pentecost as a time for special prayer.

It is called “Thy Kingdom Come: Nine days of prayer from Ascension to Pentecost”. You can use the booklet that has been delivered or find resources online at the church website or at the Diocese of Southwark website. Ideas to help you and to help us as a group of Christians to play our part in the continuing work of Jesus. At the heart of the Thy Kingdom Come prayer campaign is the challenge to think of five people that you want to pray for specifically because they are people who do not yet know the love of God in their lives.

Write down their names and commit to pray for them every day for the next nine days.

Perhaps you are praying for them already. Perhaps you will continue praying for them after Pentecost. That doesn't matter. Prayer changes lives.

The early followers of Jesus were changed massively by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But I think they were changed before that too. The experience of meeting the risen Jesus in the midst of their fear and separation had changed them. So that when he left them to go to be in heaven they prayed.

We are waiting and hoping for many things as we continue to live through the Coronavirus emergency. It is tough and frightening and lonely. But miraculously the lockdown has not prevented us from meeting the risen Christ during this Easter season.

We have also seen how the circumstances have not stifled the love and life at the heart of our church.

So on Ascension Day we can hear Jesus as he promises us power to help spread the Good News and we can respond knowing that no lockdown can shut out the Spirit of God.

We can respond in prayer together with sisters and brothers all around the world knowing that through our prayers God's love can reach further than we could have imagined possible. Amen

Reflection

How do *you* think the disciples would have felt when Jesus left them?

How are *you* feeling as we continue to be physically isolated as a church?

Does God feel close at hand or distant from you?

Pray to feel God's presence very near to *you* today. Pray for courage for *yourself* and our church family as we continue in isolation.

Act as Jesus' body on the earth by doing something to show God's love.

Thy Kingdom Come

Remember to pray everyday from Ascension Day today until Pentecost. The theme this year is praying and caring.

Use the booklet and /or the online resources

<https://southwark.anglican.org/tkc> to help you focus your prayers over this nine day period.



Responsory

As we wait in silence,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we listen to your word,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we worship you in majesty,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your refreshing,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your renewing,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your equipping,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your empowering,

make us ready for your coming Spirit.

Closing Prayer

God of laughter and tears

Immerse us in glory

Clothe us with power

Fill us with wisdom

Bless us with love

Amen



**Faith, hope and love
in Hither Green**

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