

Ascension Sunday
20/05/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1-11	Promise of Ascension
Psalms 93	The Majesty of God's Rule
Eph 1:15-23	Paul's Prayer
Luke 24:44-53	Jesus appears to his disciples
	The Ascension of Jesus

Sermon by Elizabeth Brown

Forty days.
Forty days of wonder, of mystery,
Of sudden appearances of the risen Jesus,
of greetings of peace, of talk and fellowship
wherein the disciples found joy and reassurance,
in the remembering, the recalling
of Jesus teaching

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, whence he shall come in glory to judge both the living and the dead. A mind boggling statement of faith which challenges the finiteness of our human minds and imagination!

Earlier we heard two accounts of Jesus' ascension, both written by Luke. In the last chapter of his Gospel, Luke depicts the events of the Easter season as all happening on Easter day - the resurrection, Jesus' meeting with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, his revelation to them in the breaking of bread and later his appearance to all the disciples gathered in Jerusalem where he assured them he was no ghost, but flesh and bone with the signs of his suffering still visible and hungry for something to eat. But this body was subtly different from his earlier human body.

Today's gospel reading began with Jesus' practical reminder to the disciples of what he had told them so often when he was with them 'that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.' One can imagine the disciples' confusion. They had witnessed his death; yet here was Jesus in bodily form sharing a meal and continuing his teaching. Then as Luke says so simply 'he **opened their minds** to understand the scriptures'; and he enunciates what is to become the mission of the church - 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' and extending to all Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth! Salvation is to be proclaimed globally. We are reminded of Simeon's words at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, when with the baby Jesus in his arms, he proclaims: "for my eyes have seen your salvationa light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

The disciples are overwhelmed! How can they become true witnesses of the resurrection? Despite having opened their minds to understand the scriptures, Jesus, knowing the turmoil of their feelings, promises them that they will be '**clothed with power from on high**', that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they are to wait until this happens.

This is a reflection of Jesus receiving the Spirit at his baptism, as he began his ministry. Having received the Spirit, the disciples will begin to acquire that **'knowledge of salvation'** that will enable them to be witnesses to all Jesus did and taught; also they will be ministers **of the word**. Their commission has been given, the Spirit promised! Hear more next Sunday, it's Pentecost!!

Then he led them out of the city and as they had done six weeks earlier on that fatal evening before Good Friday. They crossed the Kidron Valley, passed by the Garden of Gethsemane as they climbed the steep dusty slope to the high ridge of the Mount of Olives. One can imagine Jesus turning and looking back across the valley to the walled city, the city he loved and for which he had wept, with its holy temple and the Golden Gate through which he had entered on Palm Sunday.

So to Bethany, where Jesus had spent so many times of loving friendship and hospitality with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, experienced the sadness of the death of Lazarus, and the joy at his resurrection (a prelude for Christ's own resurrection); the uninhibited anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary, the departure from Bethany to ride through the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. For Jesus it had been a place of peace, a refuge from the increasing resentment and hostility of the leaders of the Synagogue. It was a haven of respect, love, affirmation and adoration for this so human, so divine Son of God, a pattern for our hospitality in his name! This time Jesus was not preparing to enjoy his friends' hospitality. The exodus of his suffering, death and resurrection was complete. His personal ministry on earth had come to an end. He was about to return to his Father.

Jesus blessed his disciples and as they were watching, he was lifted up into heaven. In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke not only extends the time between resurrection and ascension to forty days, but also enlarges the image - as Jesus was lifted up into heaven a cloud took him out of their sight; two men in white robes suddenly appear and challenge the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, **will come in the same way as you saw him go ...**" In Luke's account of the resurrection, two men in dazzling clothes appeared to the women in the empty tomb and said to them, "He is not here, but has risen." 'Cloud' is a symbol frequently used in scriptures to indicate the presence of God - in their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were led by a cloud by day; at the transfiguration God spoke from a cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him."

The earthly presence of God has ended; the one and only sacrifice needed to redeem the human race from sin and alienation has been paid. The sacrificial Lamb has been exalted and glorified and received back into the Father's presence. The Eucharist has been established, and its celebration is to be done in remembrance of him **until he comes** as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26; his Church, his body on earth, is about to be inaugurated.

The disciples and Paul expected that Jesus' second coming would occur in their lifetime and eagerly awaited the parousia. As Jesus told his disciples at their last meeting, **it is not for them nor for us to know** God's timing, so as they did, while we await this second coming, we live in the 'middle' of time awaiting God's final fulfillment - the new Creation, the new Jerusalem which John talked about last Sunday!

We are today's people of the Spirit, we are a chosen part of the Body of Christ in this place, so

these commands apply to us as they did to the disciples. How can we obey in today's world? Individually, it means that in our lives we need to reflect Jesus' first commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself (10:27) and so proclaim the salvation of humans for which Christ died. Great honesty is required to attend to oneself, to one's thinking, one's feelings, to acknowledge one's fears, prejudices, disbeliefs and beliefs. First we have to recognize and acknowledge our sins and that is the hardest part, isn't it? We are faithful members of the church; we lead mostly blameless, ordinary lives - wherein do we sin? And Jesus says to all eras; when have you given a cup of water in my name? It is strangers who need this gift - not only our friends. Do we venture into the unknown where even our presence would be gift? Do we show Christ to the community in our everyday lives? For he never thought humans were not worth a greeting, a helping hand, a healing. Time and time again **he broke the social and religious taboos of his day.**

What is the announcement that the church must make to the world? Not only that individuals need to repent of their personal sin; but that the whole world is out of kilter with the teaching of Jesus Christ! Globally there is little respect for the worth of human beings, all made in the image of God. We are very aware of these attitudes and their outcomes in our own beloved country - the treatment of asylum seekers, the plight of the homeless, the neglect of our indigenous people, the incredible greed of our consumer driven society to name but a few. You can add to the list! God in Christ showed a different way to live, where people are respected and secure in that knowledge; where wrongs can be righted and freely forgiven. There was a wonderful example of forgiveness in the paper last Tuesday. Gill Hicks, an Australian, who lost both lower legs in the terrorist train bombing in London in July 2005 and who has now learned to walk using prosthetic legs, referred to the unconditional love given by so many involved in her healing and recovery and said she doesn't hate the suicide bomber! The church must announce and keep on announcing the disturbing news that there can be a different way of living - a way of love and forgiveness!

A commission was given,
a final blessing bestowed,
God's cloud of concealment
two angels in white.
Hope joyfully revived
faith strengthened
a promise of power.
The Lamb of God worshipped,
God continually blessed in the Temple

**Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended!
At the Father's throne of grace,
He receives our prayers,
and lovingly intercedes on our behalf.**

