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Acts 1:1 - 14

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15 - 23

Luke 24:44 – 53

Ascension: living in the power that sustains

For several centuries the church did not treat the Ascension as though it happened forty days after Easter despite it being mentioned in Acts. In the New Testament the majority of writers link Ascension and Resurrection as two indivisible parts of one event. St Paul repeatedly says “God raised Jesus and exalted him to God’s right hand.” Raised and exalted are as one. Even in Luke the Ascension is closely linked to the Resurrection, but in Acts, the reference to forty days creates the impression of a distinct historical event. Forty days may be nothing more than the symbolic biblical “time of revelation”, but it became concretised in the liturgy of the church, allowing us to contemplate the Ascension on its own, as if we were looking at a piece of action in slow motion replay. But if we are going to understand this piece of slow motion replay, we need to comprehend the game of which it is a part. The meaning of Ascension is linked to the Resurrection, the decisive event of Christian faith. It is the Resurrection that settles whether God is God and whether God really dwelt amongst us in Jesus of Nazareth. Without the Resurrection the Crucifixion would be the end of Jesus, and the church would be nothing more than a Society, much like the Bonhoeffer Society or the Bach Society or the Gilbert and Sullivan Society.

The Ascension seems to be a story about the disposal of Jesus’ body. But the real agenda “transcends the boundaries of history”. Ascension declares that when God raised Jesus he was gathered into God. Ascension gives us a glimpse from heaven of Christ’s complete triumph. When we say God exalted Jesus, or that Jesus sits at the right hand of God we mean Jesus has become one with God; he is greater than all his works. He is indeed “above” us as God is above us, but not in the geographical sense.

At Ascension we use the language of exaltation – the language of Doxology: highly poetic language used to speak or sing about something that is really beyond words, such as God and the presence of God. Part of the struggle we have as people of faith is that our core story points to something that reaches beyond the usual boundaries of language. In today’s world people take that to mean it is not true or real. But our perspective is that things are most real when they are understood and held within a bigger, transcendent context. That context is constantly fed by our worship, which uses the language of doxology all the time. It may seem irrelevant to some, but for us it gives life a deeper, thicker sense than is available to us in other ways. It is like saying, our files are in rich text, and sometimes they are encrypted, so we have to open them in a special way.

That Jesus has become one with God means one of us shares everything with God: the divine and the human belong together in a fully integrated way. The long debates that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed were a struggle about just this: the

definition of Jesus as fully God and fully human. That one of us shares everything with God is good news. It means our humanness has been gifted with a dignity beyond our imagining. That God exalted Jesus of Nazareth is a sign of God's ultimate will to perfect and renew all human nature beginning with him and all who are in him. And in being raised to be with God, Jesus takes with him in the Spirit, all to whom he is joined.

Political and educational systems argue for human dignity to be maintained on many different bases, but in the church we argue for human rights and dignity on the basis that divinity and humanity are one in Jesus Christ. What has happened in him is a sign of what all human beings are worth. Because of him we have a new respect for our humanity and it gives substance to the mission we have of serving our sisters and brothers in the world.

From the Ascension we not only gain a new respect for human dignity, we realise that the Church is part of the Gospel. At Ascension we come one step closer to understanding a new dimension of the Holy Spirit's work: how Jesus became the head of a body of disciples who continued his work without him present. This fearful, anxious, bewildered community, which extended beyond the twelve, and included women and men, had no power of its own and didn't seem to be able to generate any. But it received power, and it was the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It brought new life where none was predicted or expected. It was this and no other force or good idea that transformed the disciples into the foundation of the Christian church: a people who knew themselves to be Christ's body on earth, acting on his behalf. A vast community which has been continuous in history and which reaches even to us, gathered here today.

It is good to realise that the Church is part of the Gospel. Amongst some groups of people it is common to contrast the institution of the church with the movement that began with Jesus. This is a false dualism, but it finds support amongst fringe groups and Christian authors who are disenchanted with the church and believe their ideas are the ones the Holy Spirit should be promoting. But when the Church defined Jesus as fully human and fully divine it refused to preference to the spiritual over the physical or the heavenly over the earthly. The new sense of dignity given to the human also means there is no preference for the movement over the institution. The Church is a very human institution but its life has its origins in God, and its task is to lead us to God. There can be no more important task, and there is no more important institution to belong to – despite its many failings as an organization.

On the day when we gather as a Parish for our AGM and consider the business of our congregations and Mission, the Ascension is a gift to us. Here we see that we are not in this business for ourselves. We have been called to do something of ultimate importance for the world, perhaps the most important thing there is. We are called to be the people of God in this district, acting in Christ's place, making known the works of God, and caring for others in God's name. This is an amazing thing to consider. But this is the vision that comes to us from the celebration of this day. And there is something more. For all sorts of reasons this is a very hard time to be in the church. But Ascension tells us that the power at work amongst us is the power of God. Surrounded as we are by many spiritual and physical problems, we are here to say that if God lives, so shall God's church. We may not be able to see how. But in faith

and hope we know that the power, which lifts up the dead, is the power that sustains, even when there is no other sign such a thing will happen.
