

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 10th May 2018, Ascension Day.
Luke 24.44-end (Acts 1.4-11; Daniel 7.9-14)*

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In June last year, someone on the worship group asked, 'Could we have an Ascension Day service next year?', and Rick said 'Yes, good plan.'
And then, of course, he left!

There is something of a parallel here with what is happening for the disciples, because this is the day we celebrate the great divine absence!

Ever since Easter Day, the transformed, risen Jesus has been making appearances to his disciples, popping up all over the place to support and re-assure them of his real presence with them (feel my wounds, watch me eat this fish, do not be afraid). And finishing off unfinished business – like making sure Peter understands he is loved, and forgiven for the three times he denied Jesus, in order that he can minister fully to others: 'Go, feed my sheep'.

The risen Jesus has been transforming their understanding of who he is and what Scripture says about him, as on the Road to Emmaus, and in today's gospel: *'He opened their minds to understand the scriptures'*.

The disciples, having thought they had lost everything when their teacher and friend died on the cross, have been through a roller-coaster of emotions of abandonment, grief, fear,

puzzlement, doubt, joy, peace, excitement ... and probably exhaustion!

But they've had a visible, audible Christ with them.

Today we celebrate and mark the day he left, under happier circumstances. Having given them instructions for what they were to do and what the steps would look like (wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit to come, then go into all the lands to do my work), he went.

My recollection is that when Rick left in January, we were sad but mainly, all very celebratory for him about the great new appointment and full of good wishes for him. He handed over a pen-drive of information, gave us a final sermon of instruction and blessings, and left!

And we were left, very much as the disciples were, in a sort of vacuum of time between that leaving and the next arriving. There was not much choice about it: we had to get motivated, and take up the reins and get on, hoping that we would keep managing until the next thing or person turned up.

That is probably how it was for those disciples who watched Jesus being taken back into God, watched until he was out of sight, and then began the period of absence.

God created for them a time of pause, in which they could prepare themselves, get motivated, and ready for the huge task that Jesus had entrusted them with of being witnesses for him to the ends of the earth.

There must have been some sense of apprehension in the anticipation, surely.

But Jesus had moved on, and they were entrusted with managing.

They were not dropped in it, nor expected to set off running, they were to wait and pray, staying put in Jerusalem for the promised spirit, the power from on high to come.

Two things strike me.

One is that they would not have felt fully responsible for taking on the task if Jesus had remained on earth, putting in appearances here and there to do it too; its just not the same thing as having to do it all by yourself.

Believe me!

So God's mad plan was that Jesus handed the baton to his disciples and they knew it was seriously theirs.

Of course, they were not going to be able or required to do it without the holy spirit, once that came they could start.

But in this period of waiting, that sense of real responsibility and motivation was getting fostered.

The second is how powerful a time that was.

They entered that vacuum of waiting with great joy and continually blessing God; a wonderful picture of great prayer energy in this static point of preparation.

That is the inspiration for the movement called 'Thy Kingdom Come' which the Archbishops of Canterbury is heading up, for

prayer to happen globally, 24/7, praying for the Holy Spirit to come afresh on his people.

The little Novena prayer books are the means by which we join with that movement.

They are very simple and inviting to use, a different picture each day to take you into your own conversation with God about our world and our place in it, and our longing for the Spirit to enable us.

It's only ten days, so give it your best!

Before today's service turns us towards that waiting and praying for the Spirit to come, let's pause and look again at the moment of the ascension of Christ.

It is the strangest description, and has been reinforced as a picture in our minds by a lot of artists portraying it literally, with clouds and superman style elevations.

The mechanisms can get a bit in the way, we can get a bit stuck on and lost in the 'How?' of it all.

We won't ever solve it, trying to, is to set ourselves up for a dead-end.

But wondering at, and about it, is a constructive thing to do, that is, entering the mystery, letting it be full of the endless possibilities of what it means for us.

On Monday, the confirmation group was looking at the nature of God as fully human and fully divine, and we were really challenged by this, the more we thought about it, and turned the images around.

This is the same Jesus, ascending to his Father, as was born of Mary and lived in Nazareth.
Fully human, fully divine.

In his earthly ministry, before his crucifixion, his disciples didn't for a moment question if he was fully human, that was absolutely obvious.

It was a lot harder for them to see, and believe, that he was also fully divine, the Son of God. They sort of saw it in little flashes of recognition but it was not possible to understand it more than that.

We start with the benefit of hindsight, we understand the nature and role of Jesus through the teachings of the New Testament and through our experience of God.

For me, that makes it easier to believe that Jesus is fully divine than that Jesus is fully human.

I can picture the fully human bit if I am thinking of his time pre-crucifixion, and the detail and emphasis on his birth but the challenge for me is the human bit *now*.

The *fleshly* nature of Jesus has moved on but the human nature of Jesus cannot have got lost if he is still the same Jesus.

In his changing to the resurrection body, some of the physical attributes changed entirely (he was no longer solid) but there was still the recognisable human person, this was not a ghost.

Still fully human, still fully divine, he was now less visually, *obviously* human, more visually suggestive of divine.

What I want to hold onto is the fully human part of Jesus whilst he is ascending to his Father.

Do not lose sight of that as we gaze in our imagination at him disappearing from view.

Keep it in mind as he reappears in view of his Father, now in the vision Daniel had of the arrival of Christ.

He has arrived '*like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven*'.

He has taken his humanity, the essence rather than the flesh of it, into the highest of places.

Because of that, we now have access in a quite different way.

Now there is experienced knowledge of what it is to be human, right in the centre of the Godhead.

Jesus came to live among us in a moment of recorded history, in real time.

The ascension is the witness in real time to the movement back, the opposite end of the period that began with Mary saying 'Yes'.

The mystery that he is fully human and fully divine continues, and is how he was, and is, and is to come.

What difference does it make?

All the difference in the world!

Now when we pray to Jesus, we are confident that we are heard and understood in our humanness, right in the highest place, we are known.

So may the **ascended Lord**, encourage and inspire you to pray with confidence and fervour for the coming of the Spirit afresh at Pentecost. *Amen*