

7.30pm HC

***Ascension Day* 18 May 2023**

Ascension Day: an end or a beginning?

St. Luke wrote 2 accounts of Jesus' return to heaven, both of which we have heard. Today's gospel is an ending- the last 9vv of Luke's gospel, the completion of Christ's ministry on earth. And yet the same event, the Ascension, the account of which David read us from Acts, is the beginning of that book, Luke's account of the explosion of faith in Christ which happened next, through the Holy Spirit, given to all the believers on the Day of Pentecost.

So I repeat, is Ascension Day an end or a beginning?

Winston Churchill famously said after the Battle of El Alamein:

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

And, as at that point in 1942, so much more on Ascension Day, on an eternal and universal scale- the great victory has been won, and the beginning, the earthly phase of Jesus' ministry, is ended. But the mission continues, for God's kingdom to come fully on earth. Christians, in his name & in the power of his Holy Spirit, continue to stand against sin, the world & the devil, as we say in the Baptism service, continue to take Christ's light and love into a dark and broken world. We know that God's kingdom will not come fully until Jesus returns in power and glory at the end of time.

So Ascension Day may indeed be 'the end of the beginning'.

Is it also the beginning of the next phase of the God's salvation of his world, the phase in which we play *our* part

as *we* work and pray for God's kingdom to come

in our nation, our world, our community, our own lives?

Our focus this evening, however, must be not on us but on Christ, risen, ascended and glorified. Christ, who has fulfilled all that was purposed for him from the beginning of time, who did not shirk this call but

was obedient to death, even death on the cross.

And therefore, as the hymn in Philippians Chapter 2 tells us so eloquently,

God has highly exalted him and given him

the name above all names,

that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father,

This wonderful outcome is enacted *today*:

Christ is welcomed home

and seated at the Father's right hand.

'Job done' as someone said at Morning Prayer a few hours ago!

This is the most joyful of all endings, and so we rejoice,

we celebrate, we worship Jesus, our Saviour and King.

And yet it is an ending and we find endings hard.

We stand with those disciples who watch him leave.

The disciples for whom the seven weeks since his resurrection have been a whirlwind-

of fear and hope, presence and absence,

sorrow and joy, doubt and faith.

They have clear instructions to stick together, to wait for the power from on high but they don't want him to go!

And we, despite our hindsight telling us

Pentecost will happen soon, we too feel the all too human sadness of goodbye, the dull ache of an ending.

In reflecting on this, I was drawn afresh to Luke's gospel account, which has fewer instructions than in Acts, and no inquisitorial angels either.

And I noticed, as if for the first time, that Jesus withdrew *'while he was blessing them'*.

He lifted his hands, blessed them and was carried up into heaven. And what form did that blessing take?

A cheery wave as if to say 'I'm off, see you later?'

NO, surely it was Christ gift of his spirit to those close friends, what John describes as his breathing on them.

And if that was so, there was continuity, ongoing *presence*, not separation and absence.

Presence that was more constant than before, because it was his Spirit within, unlimited by his earthly body.

Presence that moved them to worship him, return to Jerusalem with great joy, gather continually in the temple.

His presence – no longer visible but still utterly real, which drew them together daily until that great day when they were at the centre of the many, gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Yes they had to wait, for the greater, wider outpouring of the Spirit but they were not left desolate, not abandoned,

rather blessed, inspired and comforted by Christ
even as was leaving...

So, Ascension Day: an end, or a beginning?

The answer has to be both.

And not in the sharp or disconnecting way that we think of them. There was no break, no awkward pause or fearful uncertainty,

but Christ's presence, through his Spirit, over all, in all, through all.

The presence of Christ, , who was there in creation at the beginning and will be there at the end, Christ Alpha and Omega, in whom all things hold together.

Our own beginnings and endings, and those of our loved ones are in his hands.

Christ with us and in us yesterday, today and for ever,

just as he told us to remember:

I am with you always, to the end of the age.