

## Sermon on Ascension Day 2018 by Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham

Readings: Acts 1: 1 -11; Luke 24:44-53

‘.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.’ Acts 1: 8

‘And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ Luke 24:49

The story of Jesus ascending into heaven was a defining image for the new Christian community; that’s how St Luke, who wrote also the Acts of the Apostles, was inspired to see it. For a forty day period after Easter the Lord had appeared to his disciples; he gave proof he was not dead and gone; and talked to them about the coming of God’s kingdom. Eventually the day came when these regular appearances to his followers of the risen Jesus ceased. It was the end of the beginning for the apostles and the start of the new era, both in the life of the church and in the life of the whole world.

There were two significant components in the conversation Jesus had with the apostles at his Ascension. They were given two things - a promise and a calling.

The promise was that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit has come, power from on high. The calling or charge to them was to be witnesses.

That promise of God’s Spirit coming upon them to empower them is dramatically depicted in the following chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. In John’s Gospel Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit gently upon the apostles at his first appearance to them on the evening of the day of his resurrection in the privacy of the sealed room. By contrast, according to Luke’s narrative there is this powerful manifestation of the coming of the Holy Spirit in a public event. God’s presence is made visible and tangible. When Jesus was baptised in the river Jordan the Holy Spirit descended visibly upon him in the shape of a dove and the divine voice was heard, empowering him for his ministry. In a similar way the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost in a visible and audible way – the fire, the sound of rushing wind.

The first effect of the coming of the promised Holy Spirit was that people heard the message about God in their own languages. This was a conscious reversal of the ancient story of the tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis – of the first human city, the first urban development project, when God decided to thwart the over-weening pride of humans by introducing different languages. Now according to St Luke, on the Day of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus at his Ascension, is seen and heard setting up a new pattern of communication – which overcomes barriers to understanding and respect, built up by the pride and arrogance, which human efforts tend to lapse into when the transforming grace of the Spirit is absent. The Holy Spirit’s effect is to set right and restore to wholeness the twisted and deformed body which human community has become - parts unable to communicate with one another are returned into a shared conversation and this is a conversation of love - love for one another as Christ has loved us.

The historic Christian churches especially in Western culture have neglected the Holy Spirit, God in action within us and all around us, compared to the attention we give to the person of Jesus Christ. Have a look at any hymn-book – there are a lot more hymns about or addressed to Jesus than to the Holy Spirit. Celebrating the Ascension and then Pentecost helps us to counter-balance that tendency. It’s strange that we have had this tendency to downplay the promise of the Holy Spirit because in every single version we use of the prayer over the bread and wine – the Eucharistic prayer - when we pray that those elements will become for us the body and blood of Jesus, we pray that this will happen by the power the Holy Spirit or that God will send the Holy

Spirit to make that happen. So officially if you like we look for and pray for the power of the Holy Spirit when we come to receive Jesus at the communion.

One of the features of our recent involvement as a church in Partnership for Missional Church has been inviting us to reflect and share what God has been up to in our lives. That is a way of helping us to be more aware God's Spirit is at work in us and around us. A big part of having faith is claiming in our own lives that promise Jesus gave us of the power of the Holy Spirit. This is also what the Archbishops have asked us to be doing through these 11 days between now and Pentecost in the global wave of prayer called Thy Kingdom Come. By asking us to focus on prayer this recognises that it is God the Holy Spirit working in our lives and in the lives of others which makes the real difference. In the words of Jesus in a gospel passage we read recently on Sunday "Without me you can do nothing". And that is actually a big encouragement to us because it assures us that the power to cause hearts to be changed, sins to be forgiven, communities to be changed is the work of God; we are called to be part of that work, yet the power for it comes from the Spirit.

So, this brings us to the second thing Jesus gave his followers in that farewell conversation at the Ascension. The calling to be witnesses. A witness is someone who gives a first-hand account of something they have seen, heard or experienced. The apostles were told they would be witnesses to what they had seen come to pass and been part of.

These events were signs that something very new and different had come to light. They witness the Messiah, God's anointed one, was not above suffering or death. He shared those universal human experiences. He announced and demonstrated hope, faith in God's care and love, drawing close to those who were suffering. They witness to the resurrection of Christ - Christ was alive - his suffering and death had been vindicated by God; death and evil had been defeated. They witness a change of heart, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins was now to be proclaimed in the name of Christ, and this was not for Jews only but also all nations. These were the events and new realities to which the apostles were called to bear witness.

And this good news continues to be what we are called to bear witness to as Christian community, as the church; and as people who have faith. What we share as we bear witness has to be more than ideas and words. Witnesses share what they believe they have seen heard and experienced - their calling is to be true to that. Witnesses are open to questioning, and it is up to those who hear whether to trust and believe them. We are called to bear witness - our actions, our way of acting and being - as well as what we say, these are part of our witness. Are these things commensurate with the realities of a faith in God who has come to us in Christ and now fills us with the Holy Spirit? Bearing witness by our acceptance and forgiveness of one another and of strangers, of welcome to all, of readiness to translate and see translated the Christian faith into new cultures and ways of life, of care for those who are suffering, of hope in God's future for us, and of willingness to be questioned, to see and look for God at work in new ways in our community and in our own lives.

Celebrating the Ascension of Jesus as we do today is an important opportunity to reclaim that promise and that calling we have been given; both as a community of Christians and as individual believers. The promise of the Holy Spirit - of God's Spirit in our lives as we pray and as we seek that Spirit. And our calling to bear witness - to speak, to act - to share our experience of the love and hope that we have in us through faith in the God whose love came to light in Jesus and works in us all by the Spirit.

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