**REFLECTION for 7th Sunday of Easter - 24th May 2020**

*Please pray for Ismay Charles, on Thursday, 28th May 2020 at 2pm when she will be laid to rest at Mortlake Cemetery.  May she Rest in Peace and rise in glory. And hold her husband, Lambert, and family in your prayers at this time.*

**ACTS 1: 1-11; LUKE 24: 44-53**

**ASCENSION DAY** marks the remembrance and celebration of the ascension of the risen Christ to heaven.

In the book of Acts, which Luke writes to continue his account of Jesus' work in history (by his Spirit), he says (1:1–3): “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God.” Therefore, we learn that the ascension of Jesus back to the right hand of God the Father occurred forty days after the resurrection.

‘Now above the sky he’s King,’ we sing. The ascension marks the point when Jesus ends his time on earth and ascends’ to his Father’s throne. He is ‘taken up’ and the disciples stand there looking up into the sky. Of course this does not mean that heaven and the throne of God are literally above in the sky. Height and depth, up and down, have always been metaphors for greater and lesser degrees of honour and glory, and this must have been clear to the disciples then as it is to us now.

The disciples are commissioned. ‘Are you going to restore Israel now?’ they ask. Jesus’ answer is to tell them that they are going to bring about the Kingdom of God. It is their job, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And as they stand there staring up, the messengers come to tell them to get on with it. He will come back, but meanwhile they have a task to fulfil as witnesses to the ends of the earth. This is our task still.

Luke ends his Gospel with a brief summary of the ascension, with which he then begins Acts. Before this passage the disciples are described as startled and terrified, frightened and doubting, joyful and disbelieving. Jesus then brings order and explanation.

He shows them that the scriptures, which they have known all along, are the sufficient basis for an understanding of all that has happened. Their religious thinking has been turned upside down, but now he reasserts the authority of scripture for them. They have a basis for new biblical theology, the New Testament understood by reference to the Old.

He explains the immediate traumatic past and then moves on to give them purpose and the promise of power for the future. They have a task to perform and the authority and indwelling power to do it. Now they are to proclaim the gospel of repentance and forgiveness through the name of Jesus to the whole world.

They had seen death, they had seen resurrection, and for the disciples of Jesus that sight of the risen Christ back among them must have seemed the most wonderful thing they could ever hope to witness. No wonder they asked the question that had been on each one’s lips since his return: ‘Lord is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ It had to be, surely? What more could be revealed than had been revealed to them already? The answer was just a few moments away, as suddenly Jesus was taken from them, and they were left struggling to come to terms with the unexpected once again. Whatever the precise event behind the language, one thing is clear – their picture of Christ had been far too small, their understanding of his purpose much too narrow. For he came not just to restore Israel but to redeem the world, not to rule on earth but to be enthroned in heaven. They had glimpsed the man but not the face of God beneath. They believed they saw the whole picture, when they saw but one piece of the jigsaw. Suddenly they had to think again, for Jesus was greater than they had begun to imagine. The same, I suspect, may be true for us all.

The Ascension marks the end of Jesus’ appearances on earth and his physical, historical ministry. It is also a beginning, because his moving away from the confining qualities of time and place means that Jesus will be present always and everywhere. It also means that the humanity of Jesus is now within the nature of the wholeness of God. Our God has scarred hands and feet, and knows what it is like to be severely tempted, acclaimed and despised.

In a way, it is at the Ascension that the value of all the risk and suffering involved in the Incarnation becomes apparent. The saving victim takes his rightful place in the glory of heaven, and only that can enable God’s Holy Spirit to be poured out in wave upon wave of loving power that stretches to all people in all generations.

Amazingly, our own Parish, our own congregation, is part of this glorious celebration with its far-reaching effects. Each of us, living squashed into a particular time frame lasting merely a lifetime can be drenched in the power of that Spirit, and caught up in the energising nature of it. We, like the disciples, are expectant with joy at the prospect of the gifts God has in store, and yet still mulling over the breathtaking events of Easter. It is like being in the still centre, in the eye of the storm.

A lot of years have gone by since Jesus ascended into heaven – over two thousand years. But that isn’t much if you aren’t stuck in time as we are, and God isn’t stuck in time. He’s prepared to wait to give us humans the chance to turn to him in our lives, and we don’t know the date when Jesus will return. We do know that in God’s good time he will come back, and everyone will see his glory together, both the living and those who have finished the earthly part of their life.

In the meantime, we have been given the Holy Spirit, so that God can be with us in person every moment of our life, helping us and guiding our choices, steering us safely through temptations, and teaching us more and more about our amazing God. All he waits for is to be invited.

I pray that Christ may give us all the grace to understand and feel the significance of these historical events. According to Luke 24:45 that is the work of the risen Christ: "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." Until the Lord takes the opaque casing off of our minds, we can scarcely perceive the significance of the ascension at all. That's why the apostle Paul teaches that, unless Christ takes it away, a veil lies over our minds, concealing the splendour of his work (2 Corinthians 3:14). It may help us pray more earnestly that Christ remove this veil if we know what it looks like from the inside. It's a little different for each person, but the motifs on the fabric are similar.

*Christ our ascended King pour upon us the abundance of his gifts and bring us to reign with him in glory.*