

Luke 24.44-53, Acts 1.1-11.  
Ascension Day: 29<sup>th</sup> May 2014  
7:00 p.m. at St. Andrew's, Totteridge

How our outlook and vision may be uplifted with the risen Lord.

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
always be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer  
(Ps.19:14).*

and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup>While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. Luke 24.50

Just look for a moment at the picture by Rembrandt at the front of your O.o.S. It's quite a vision isn't it... our Lord, or a rather traditional vision of him, giving off an aura of light, staring up to heaven... with flowing locks, a beard and moustache, wearing a seamless white robe, standing on a cloud upheld by winged cherubim... is lifted skyward, to the amazement of his followers gathered beneath, who look up in awe. It is high drama.

One might call this quite a conventional image by today's standards, where art is more often post-enlightenment, post-abstract, and post-modernist. Some might say post-acceptable, but this could be interpreted as being stuck in the past. Whatever we think about art, ancient or modern, we cannot fail to see the quality of Rembrandt's vision, the skill at this rendering in oils, the contrast between the darkness of the earth-bound, and the lightness of the source of life itself, portrayed at the very moment of movement from the human to the divine, in this very act of reunification with an inherently divine origin.

Preachers struggle to say something new about what's going on here. Congregations of the faithful are, I suspect, more often bemused these days, prepared perhaps to toe the creedal line but not without having first to paradoxically suspend their faculties of reason. The willing suspension of disbelief, when it comes to the actuality of the Ascension is, as with many of Jesus' miracles, a big ask.

But we do ourselves a disservice to discount this powerful allegory, which offers the opportunity to explore hidden, symbolic meanings - not the least of which is that God, as the theologian Karl Rahner puts it, is absolute mystery.

It begins with Moses asking God his name (Exodus 3.14). "I am that I am" comes the cryptic reply; followed up later with "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Ex. 33.20). 'Nothing is divulged,' says David Bryant, 'and it cannot be; for there is built-in invisibility, incomprehensibility, and otherness about God.'

So how can we earth this electric story, how can we ground this scripture, which brings us to the very edge of matter and Spirit, of fancy and reason? There is a way, and it is the uplifting way of the Apostle Paul, which he outlines in his letter to the Colossians (1.15). With soaring insight, he propounds the idea of Jesus of Nazareth, 'the crucified rebel' being transformed into, 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation ... he is before all things and in him all things hold together.'

The implications of this are too enormous for us to fully contemplate. Jesus, the carpenter's son, is no longer bound by time and space. He has shaken off, as he had to, the limitations of human culture, religion and ethics, to take on a universal, transcendent and cosmic significance.

In the same way, the Eucharist for example, becomes so much more than just a re-enactment of the Last Supper, a gathering of friends with common cause and belief, where food and drink are taken and liturgy recited. It is transformed into a fathomless mystery, a participation in something divine.

So too with our prayers. Far from being dumbly offered up to the unknown pagan God of the Areopagus, we know now that they are heard by a God of loving mercy.

The Ascension is vital because it marks the end of the post-resurrection appearances and the rule of Christ in the present. But it is also a time full of promise, of hope and glory, that our eyes may be opened to see the glory of God shining wherever love is unleashed. As St. Augustine said,

*We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity; but in him, we can be there by love.*

*Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

## **Luke 24.44-53**

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,<sup>46</sup> and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,<sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things.<sup>49</sup> 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.'

## **The Ascension of Jesus**

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.<sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.<sup>52</sup> And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;<sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

## **Acts 1.1-11      The Promise of the Holy Spirit**

1

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning <sup>2</sup>until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup>After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. <sup>4</sup>While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup>for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

### **The Ascension of Jesus**

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' <sup>7</sup> He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But 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.' <sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. <sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has

been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

## **Daniel 7.9-14**

### **Judgement before the Ancient One**

<sup>9</sup> As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. <sup>10</sup> A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence.

A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened. <sup>11</sup> I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. <sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

<sup>13</sup> As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup> To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

## **Ephesians 1.15 - end**

### **Paul's Prayer**

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

<sup>20</sup>God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

<sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

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