

SERMON LUC 29 May 2022 – Rev Mary Pearson for Lindfield UC

Something rather unexpected is happening for me, something I didn't think would happen in the foreseeable future: on 12 July I am getting on flight QF1 for London and thence to Scotland for nearly 2 months. Not so long ago there seemed to be little prospect of doing this. I am very excited. My itinerary is quite full as I catch up with family and friends, especially, of course, my daughter Rona whom I haven't seen in the flesh for 3 years. Yes, we can Skype, and I am well aware that past generations did not have this luxury, nor WhatsApp messages and emails, but would bid farewell to loved ones never knowing if or when they would see them again. Now I imagine physical reconnections. Yet, I have to say, I already dread the ensuing goodbyes which are so emotional. You will all have your own experiences and memories of these; maybe just leaving a room or a bedside; waving goodbye at a station or watching someone disappear through the departure gates at an airport, or, as in my case, as the ramp on a ferry draws up and it pulls away from the pier.

Life is full of greetings and farewells. Our stories are peopled with connections that are no longer physically there or that have just faded into the distance. So, when we hear the account of Jesus leaving his friends visibly for the last time, of his ascension, we may all bring our own emotional loading. It is striking then to read that the disciples had hearts full of rejoicing. Clearly this was something different.

The Ascension is often pushed aside as of being somewhat superfluous to the story of Jesus. We have journeyed through the really big things –his crucifixion, the extraordinary resurrection and we are now waiting for Pentecost. On a basic level we might realise that Jesus had to depart from earth in order for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit to fill and change the lives of his followers. So, yes, ok, we need the story that becomes part of our creeds: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father”.

But let's look more closely. These verses we heard are the last words of Luke's gospel. They are like a brief summing up of what has gone before. We heard that Jesus reminded his friends that his coming has been, as Luke has emphasized, a fulfilment of the Scriptures. It's like the preceding story, when he had, unknown to the 2 men walking to Emmaus, opened up the Scriptures to their understanding. Jesus is telling his disciples that his life on earth has not been “out of the blue” as it were. They will be able to

see God's purpose in what has happened and also what will happen. It has been indicated throughout the Scriptures.

Next Jesus makes an important statement about the nature of his ministry. He states that it has been about reconciliation and forgiveness for all who turn to him. That's it. This simple message is, by implication, what it should remain. The disciples have seen this happening all around them as they journey with him. How much the gospel gets overlaid with all kinds of other accretions that make it, at times, so complicated! The disciples are witnesses this good news, and they will, in the other meaning of the word, also bear witness to it in their own lives going forward. We are all to bear witness that God's forgiveness is offered openly and to live out of that for the sake of reconciliation in our world. There is such longing for this, such a hunger. Is this what lies behind much of the voter sentiment in the election? We are tired of division and words that are born out of suspicion and anger, racism and stereotyping. Of course there are huge challenges when we look at the big picture, but we start from where we are, as Jesus did, as his disciples did. Jesus promises them that he will send them what has been promised, the thing that will empower them, and though it is not named, we know that he speaks about the Holy Spirit.

The last thing that Jesus did was to lift up his hands, his hands that bore the scars of pain and suffering, and he blesses them. This is not a blessing born out of power and perfection, but a blessing, as in the Beatitudes, that acknowledges struggle with love and presence. What an important blessing! How meaningful!

All this said, with his mission accomplished as we might say, Jesus disappears from their sight. We could get stuck on asking "how did this happen?" or "where did Jesus actually go?". What the simple statement does is remove an idea of heaven as some third tier high up above the sky, where, as I have heard it described, Jesus will remain in lockdown until such time as God determines otherwise. What Jesus' ascension does do is place Jesus, with all he carried of human struggle, suffering and love, with all his humanity, into the Godhead, forever. The oftentimes rather remote God of the Hebrew Scriptures, is now the God who indeed draws us close and to whom we may come in trust, in faith in a God of compassion, forgiveness and ultimate grace.

Jesus disappeared from their sight, but his friends were not left in tears at his leaving. Rather, we are told, they worshipped him. They worshipped

him as they had never done before. Now they really knew. Jesus was indeed part of God. And they were filled with great joy. They went to the temple, praising God.

That is how Luke's gospel ends. It echoes the beginning where the story starts in the Temple with Zechariah worshipping before he is told that he will have a son who will a joy and delight and who will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring the people back and go on before the Lord. It has all been accomplished. Luke will then pick up the story in the Acts of the Apostles which he begins with another summary of events and an account of the ascension and leads on to the story of Pentecost.

The Ascension is important. It tells us much both about the disciples, the nature of their experience and of their opened understanding of who Jesus was and would remain for them. They could look back and see clearly what the presence of Jesus had been for them, just as we can when we have hearts full of memories. Albrecht Durer made a wood cut of the Ascension in which, while Jesus is seen disappearing upwards, his footprints remain on the earth.

We have "footprints" if you like, from our own experiences on our journey of faith, the things to which we have born witness, day by day, sometimes in tiny ways, sometimes in much more surprising and direction changing happenings.

Story of Frances and the homeless man...

A story like that is the kind of thing that tells us of the "footprint" of Christ and of the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit at work. It stays in the mind and can open up our own experiences. These are the kind of memories which fill our hearts with joy and which, we know, are not diminished by distance of time or place. Our life of faith is interwoven in our daily lives. It is not a separate area, something which we access perhaps most clearly on Sundays, when we come together in worship. Our life of faith is how we find that God is at work between and among us in the things that bear the touch of the sacred. In Iona, at the Abbey there is a pattern of daily worship: the morning "office" and the evening service. There is no benediction at the close of the morning worship because the whole of the day, with all its tasks and conversations, is part of the worship we offer. The benediction comes at the close of the day, a blessing of what has been and of the rest to come.

We now live in times, post Ascension and under the gift of the promised Holy Spirit. These are what has been described as the “in-between” times we inhabit, in between Jesus’ life on earth and his promised return in fulfilment of God’s purpose of love, reconciliation and forgiveness. The in between times may seem like “ordinary times’ but nothing is really ordinary, though our routines and habits may make us think so. May we have our eyes open to see the footprints that Christ left, and the Spirit enabled things that remind us of the ministry to which we are all called, each and every one of us, of bearing witness to a gospel of reconciliation, forgiveness and grace for all.