



Easter 7

Sunday after Ascension

24 May 2020

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Acts 1:6-11

Look up and see the heavens open; glimpse the glorious mystery of God: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

Let us praise the God of all life.

Look down and feel the solidity of the earth beneath us; the earth which held the very footsteps of Christ himself – the marks of everlasting grace and the costly journey of ultimate and unequivocal love.

Let us praise the God of all life

Hymn 369

*Hail the day that sees him rise, Hallelujah!
To his throne above the skies; Hallelujah!
Christ a while to mortals given,
enters now the highest heaven.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!*

*Heaven now its Lord receives,
yet he loves the earth he leaves,
though returning to his throne
still calls humankind his own.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!*

*See ! he lifts his hands above;
see! He shows his prints of love;
hark! His gracious lips bestow
blessings on his church below.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!*

*Still for us he intercedes,
his prevailing death he pleads;
near himself prepares our place,
he the first fruits of our race.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!*

*There we shall with you remain,
partners of your endless reign;
there your face unclouded view,
find our heaven of heavens in you.
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!*

Even as we celebrate your ascended holiness, Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that your Spirit will never leave us alone. Be with us and within us as we turn in worship to you and as we seek to live life as your resurrection people in the world of earthy and earthly reality.

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen

Confession

We are not the people we would hope to be. We are never near to the example we see in the beauty of your holiness and the profound depths of your compassion and love. When we are so focussed on your ascended heavenly life that we fail to look for the important tasks here on earth and walk past those waiting for our help: ***forgive us, Lord.***

Bring us back to the ground of your healing life.

When we diminish the wonder of your glorious reality, shrinking it to fit the dimensions of our own human limits and doubting the possibilities of miracles and gifts, doubting the generosity which flows in the rivers of life, far wider and kinder than our visions of compassion and mercy: ***forgive us, Lord.***

Bring us back to the ground of your healing life.

We long to be true to your leading and inspiration.

Assurance

Watch and wait in faith! For the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord surpasses all knowledge and human understanding. It comes to all who ask for grace not merit; grace which is given as a free gift to all who seek it. So we are forgiven and renewed.

Thanks be to God.

O God we thank you for the human life of Christ among us which rises before our lives and invites us towards a Godliness far grander and more wonderous than the limits of our minds and hearts. It is this that lifts our spirits and calls us into the resurrection completeness of life beyond human limitations so that our lives are embraced in grace.

We bring you our thanks today. For you are our God and we are your humble people.

Amen

Hymn 648

*Help us accept each other
as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother,
each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord among us
and bring us to believe
are **ourselves** accepted
and meant to love and live.*

*Teach us, O Lord, your lessons,
as in our daily life
we struggle to be human
and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people,
for all - not just for some,
to love them as we find them
or as they may become.*

*Let your acceptance change us,
so that we may be moved
in living situations
to do the truth in love;
to practise your acceptance
until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness
and laughter's healing art.*

*Lord, for today's encounters
with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance,
righteousness and bread,
we need new eyes for seeing,
hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us make us one!*

Gospel John 17:1-11

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 1:6-11

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Reflection

I am often surprised that at secular funerals those who speak use religious imagery as though that is normative for them and had been for the deceased. "Our loved one/friend is doubtless looking down on us all now as we remember/celebrate their life". Really! Didn't they reject God and any spiritual dimension as nothing more than mumbo-jumbo. Kerry Packer had delighted to say, after a near death experience from which he had recovered that "I saw the other side and there was nothing there". Yet at his funeral James Packer spoke of his father Kerry being there looking down from above as a fait accompli. Now I am not troubled by this borrowing of religious imagery provided it is not allowed to be seen as central Christian truth for faith people. One of the core truths captured in the Ascension narrative is that Jesus himself was not focussed on a special heavenly reality as his destiny when he left his disciples in his risen form. No, indeed! He was very focussed on getting them to re-focus on their earthly reality as the domain for their continuing interaction with him and their realisation of him as their living Lord. As the word of the Christ in John's Gospels puts it:

'I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. [John 17:9-11]

Christ ascended into eternal life beyond human sight. But, as the disciples so long ago stood looking up into heaven, they were challenged to recognise where they stood, where their ongoing reality was. Jesus said firmly and confidently that, although he was leaving them for other dimensions of life with God they would remain earth bound. And so they were to "look down", to live resurrection life with their feet on the ground and their eyes open to life around them. As someone was to put it faith people are not called to be "so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use". As the first Christians were called to their new future they were challenged to grasp their particular reality .

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria,

and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." [Acts 1:6-11]

We must ask ourselves when we remember Jesus' ascension how aware we really are of the lives and issues in the community around us and in the world beyond.

The imperative of our time as our whole world wrestles with life in a time of pandemic is very definitely to be grounded, not ethereal. Are we engaged with life in the way Jesus was, in the way that he challenged his followers to be? If we are not, then the whole incarnation of God among us has lost its power.

Remember the Johannine Christ's word: I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. [John 17:9-11]

Prayers for ourselves and Others

Lord Jesus Christ, risen and ascended into realms beyond our sight, help us, when we look up, to do so in ways that link our aspirations with yours. So may our minds, hearts and souls find dreams that are more than ethereal possibilities unearthed to human realities. Turn our eyes to the world around us with its very human challenges and realities. We pray now for the people and places whose situations particularly touch our hearts at this troubling time for our world at large.

Make us ever more life-giving in our responses to shared needs than we have ever been before and burn within us with the passion for change, Holy Spirit. May we be prepared to embrace new ways of living that will enable true and loving community in every place. Grant to us a greater hope for humankind as a whole and carry us over the crushing walls of fear, pessimism and doubt that stifle us in our challenging the powers of our day—political, corporate and institutional. Give us the strength to take risks with new adventures in faith and living.

So may the prayer our Lord taught us be the continuing focus for all.

***Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.***

Hymn 477

*Jesus calls us here to meet him
as, through word and song and prayer,
affirm God's promised presence
where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
praise the Spirit who, among us,
to our hopes and fears attends.*

*Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of Life and Lord of All,
sharer of our flesh and frailness
saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
tell his tale that all may hear;
tell the world that Christ in glory
came to earth to meet us here.*

*Jesus calls us to each other:
found in him are no divides.
Race and class and sex and language
such are barriers he derides.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
join the hands of age and youth;
join the faithful and the doubter
in their common search for truth.*

John Bell

Now let us return to our everyday world with courage and hope
for we travel in the company of Jesus our risen ascended Lord;
so may the ascended Christ hover in love above us;
the earthly Jesus be known in the ground of our lives each and every day;
and the truth of God in three persons be our reality, our hope and our joy.

Amen

Reverend Graeme Kerr