

# ASCENSION-SHAPED CHURCH

*(Ephesians 4.7-12)*

Well, today is Ascension Thursday, the day every year when Christians (some anyway) remember Jesus returning to his Father in heaven and telling his disciples to wait for and pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. How many of you knew that it was Ascension today? Perhaps a minority...

But it's an important event to mark because it sets the tone for what Christian ministry should look like. Perhaps our neglect or lack of awareness about Ascension is one of the reasons the church down the years has so often got it so wrong.

For example, we often talk about "*the* ministry" or "full-time ministry" meaning church leadership. When we talk in this way, people can easily think that only the pastor, or vicar or (worse still) priest is "*the* minister" and every other form of Christian service is not really ministry. Wrong!

No, as soon as you come to faith in Christ, you're in full time ministry. No exceptions. You may not necessarily do it all that well, but that's not the point. The point is that full-time ministry is what you are in. However you serve the Lord, whether it's in God's church or in God's world, that is your ministry and if Jesus is Lord, it's full-time. Every ministry done well and with integrity - hairdresser, road sweeper, teacher, pastor, acrobat, car mechanic - whatever - is equally valuable to the Lord, if it is done to the glory of God.

Here's another example of how Christians have so often got it wrong. The church, over the years, has tended to adopt a pyramid structure; archbishops, bishops, archdeacons, vicars, curates, everybody else. Wrong again!

That is not what Jesus set up. He specifically said to not call people 'father' (putting men on a pedestal) and he told us in the strongest terms to avoid

dominant, controlling leadership models. "The rulers of the Gentiles throw their weight around - not so with you" he said.

Instead, Jesus appointed teams of disciples (life-long learners), with different and complementary spiritual gifts.

Ephesians 4 is read at Ascension services most years; here's what it says.

*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Jesus invested in learners until they were ready to be leaders. He called them apostles, not patriarchs. Apostles are mobile. They are sent from one place to another place to reproduce in the new place what they saw in the place they left, until the place they go to looks like the place they came from.

This is Ascension-shaped ministry. Ascension is about passing on a baton. It's about one generation transferring a vision, a heritage or worldview to the next one.

For centuries, the Jews have eaten the Passover meal. Every year, the youngest at the table asks, "Why are we doing this?" And the oldest explains; "Remember where you came from, this is our story. This is who we are."

In the same way, Paul could say to Timothy, "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."

What are we passing on? What are we transmitting to the next generation?

Ephesians 4 doesn't say that Jesus bequeathed to the world a hierarchical, top-down church. Because he didn't. It says he gave different ministries with a variety of distinctive gifts. And then it says why. It was to equip the church for works of service.

That word translated "equip" (in Greek it's *katartismos*) carries a fascinating range of different meanings. Sometimes in the New Testament, as here, it's translated "equip." This is about an apprenticeship culture, helping get other people ready and confident for works of service.

That word "equip" is the same word that's used to describe fishermen preparing or cleaning their nets. Peter, Andrew, James and John tended to their nets. They got mangled seaweed and bits of old boots out of them. They repaired the holes where tears had appeared. They untangled the twisted bits of netting that had become matted. They made sure that the nets were pristine and ready for next time.

Making disciples (which every Christian is called to do, not just professional clergy) is about making sure we are all ready to serve.

There is also in this word translated "equip" an aspect of healing or restoring for people who have got damaged in life. Healthy churches rebuild people who have been damaged by life. Good churches are full of individuals who help put broken people together again.

Galatians 6.1 says, "If anyone caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore them [it's the same word; *katartismos*] – in a spirit of gentleness." Equip, prepare, clean, mend, restore... Ascension-shaped ministry is about

kindly redirecting people who have got snared up and have gone wrong in life.

Ascension-shaped ministry never says, "you made a right old mess of it last time, you're finished..." No, the church is about redirection based on spiritual truth... so that hurt people are healed and restored.

Ascension-shaped ministry is about the whole church rebuilding broken people in Jesus' name. In 2 Corinthians 13 Paul says, "We pray for you that you may be made complete." It's that same word again; equipped, ready, restored, prepared, cleaned, complete.

I thank God every Ascension Thursday for the blessed reminder that it's not all about the vicar. Vicars come and go, as this one will soon, but the church is here to stay.

The church Jesus came to establish is about everybody using every spiritual gift from the ascended Christ to equip, prepare, restore and make complete – so that the finished article will be a glorious church, a radiant bride, the hope of the world.