

WHAT DOES 'HE ASCENDED' MEAN?

(Ephesians 4.4-15 and Luke 24.36-53)

This evening we are going to consider

- What did the ascension mean to the disciples at the time?
- What did it mean to St. Paul a number of years later when he wrote to the Ephesians?
- What does the ascension mean to us today?

When we think about the Ascension, we have a focus on Jesus going up and returning to his heavenly glory.

In the hymn "Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise" we sang tonight:

- "His throne above the sky."
- "enters now the highest heaven"
- "there for Him high triumph waits"
- "still for us He intercedes" - what a promise and a privilege that is - Jesus is praying for us in heaven.

There is also a focus on what happened when Jesus had come down prior to that:

- "Christ the lamb for sinners given"
- "He has conquered death and sin."

Or in the words of the classical 1960's film *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines*;

- They go up, tiddley up up
- They go down, tiddley down down
- Up, down, flying around, looping the loop and defying the ground

Without being disrespectful, I would like us to think of some of the goings up and the coming downs in the Bible and how they apply to us today particularly on Ascension Day. And also, for us, as we go through some of the ups and downs of life, how we can know our Lord's help too.

The ups include - the Ascension and at the time of final judgement ourselves rising to meet Jesus in the air.

They also include Moses going up the mountain in Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments – the law, such an important part of God’s plan in Old Testament times.

A small number of the apostles going up a mountain with Jesus and the very special transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appeared – representing God’s law and the prophets and Jesus was seen in glory with them, as a foretaste of heaven.

The downs include- Jesus coming to earth. We sing, “He came down to earth from Heaven” as we celebrate Jesus’ birth.

And the Holy Spirit coming down in power at Pentecost.

So first, what did the Ascension mean to the apostles?

In our reading from the Gospel of St. Luke we heard how Jesus had stood among the disciples and proved that he was not a ghost by showing them his body and eating fish with them. He went on to remind them that He had told them that everything written about Him in the Old Testament must be fulfilled.

We read that he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures, then follow a small number of really key points that they would remember as our Lord’s final instructions to them, a bit like a leaving speech. We can think back ourselves to a leaving do or retirement celebration and have clear memories of what was said on that occasion.

Here Jesus’s key points were:

1. The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.
2. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.
3. You are witnesses of these things.
4. I am going to send you what my Father has promised (the Holy Spirit) but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Likewise, at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles we read, “Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised which you have heard me speak about. For John Baptised you with water but in a few days, you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”

Previously, Jesus had taught his disciples that he was to return to His Father in heaven.

He also taught them that the Holy Spirit would come down to earth with power at Pentecost.

- The Father will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever- the Spirit of truth.
- The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of all things and remind you of everything I have said to you.

Then our reading from St. Luke's Gospel told us how Jesus led the disciples to Bethany, blessed them, left them and was taken up to heaven.

More details about the ascension are given in Acts of the Apostles - "He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight and then the promise from the two men dressed in white, "This same Jesus will come back in the same way you have seen him go to heaven."

St. Luke's Gospel concludes with the words that the disciples worshiped Jesus, returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they stayed continually at the temple praising God.

So, for the disciples they had:

- Closure on our Lord's earthly ministry
- They understood that it was complete
- They understood the Scriptures and how they were fulfilled
- They knew that Jesus was now in heaven with God the Father
- But they also knew that Jesus had not abandoned them
- They also understood the promise that the Holy Spirit would come in power and that they were to wait expectantly
- They had the promise that Jesus would return one day in glory

A number of years later, St. Paul referred to Jesus' ascension as we heard from our reading from Ephesians 4. He was looking back at Jesus ascension with the perspective of the Holy Spirit coming in power at Pentecost and the growth of the early church.

We heard the words read to us:

- "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people"- words that are very similar to a verse from Psalm 68 and may well have been a saying that was frequently used
- These words emphasize that his people were and are like captives and that Jesus has set us free and given us gifts by his Holy Spirit
- He then asks our question again; "what does 'he ascended' mean?"

The answer: "that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions."

This may simply mean that Jesus really came to earth as a human being, died on the cross for us; the most humiliating way to die and was buried in a tomb within the earth. A bit like the answer in a quiz or exam question, it is ALL OF THESE.

St. Paul is emphasizing that Jesus did come to earth, suffered for us and died before being raised to life and returning to heaven to be with God the Father- higher than all the heavens.

He then goes on to refer to some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as pastors and teachers and the purpose of them to build up the church.

In other parts of the New Testament, we read that Jesus is preparing a place for us in heaven; "In my Father's house there are many mansions." And that Jesus is continuing to pray for us in heaven.

So, what does 'he ascended' mean for us this Ascension Day and how can we respond?

We are all in different places tonight. We may be full of joy and rejoice with our Lord in heaven. We may be "down" due to sickness of our own or family circumstances. Up, down, flying around, looping the loop and defying the ground.

We may not feel that we have many ups and that there a lot of downs. Jesus understands and is there.

This morning, I was listening to a 5-minute talk by Bishop Tom Wright sent by email as the first day of "Thy Kingdom Come".

Bishop Tom was saying that we should not make the mistake of thinking that there is a big gulf between earth and heaven and we are abandoned with a big gulf between us and God. Rather, Jesus is now with the Father in heaven and still knows all our needs.

Ascension is an opportunity to look back at Jesus' earthly ministry, that he came down to this world and died for us on the cross and rose to life, so that we might have eternal life by trusting in Him. A time to thank him for dying for us and living so that we can have eternal life.

We may be helped to do this by reading the very early Christian hymn in Philippians chapter 2:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Ascension is a time for being thankful that Jesus is praying for us and has prepared a place for us in heaven.

Also, Ascension Day is a time to look forward to Pentecost when we will remember the Holy Spirit coming in power. It is an opportunity to pray for the Holy Spirit to come in power in our lives and in the lives of our churches. To pray for God to give us the gifts he wants so that we can live more fully for him

A time to look forward to Jesus' return, visibly in the clouds.

- *Story of a woman at a bus stop (very strange coloured cloud; she thought that our Lord was returning in glory; she was excited and ready)*

Ascension is a time for prayer. We may all have heard about Thy Kingdom Come (the Archbishops' prayer initiative that runs between Ascension and Pentecost.)

Thy Kingdom Come is at the heart of the Lord's Prayer in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount which tells us so much about God's kingdom. By joining with the prayers of Thy Kingdom Come we can pray for friends to come to know the love of Jesus and many other things too.)