



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Ascension of the Lord

Sunday, May 24, 2020

Scripture Passages: Acts 1:1-11 & Luke 24:44-53

+I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The angels are back. Right on cue. In that awful pause as the disciples gaze, slack-jawed at seeing Jesus leave them, the angels show up – as they have a few times in the Gospels – directing baffled humans as to what God’s will is because quite frankly, we just can’t figure it out.

Just as the disciples are thinking: “what now?” the angels give them a prod; and remind them of the plan they are part of; and remind them that they have a role to play.

So, here is the first lesson from this day – we just don’t get God sometimes – nor God’s will. It is “other.” And that’s as discombobulating as it is comforting actually.

I mean I think it’s fair to say that there would be no point in thinking that God’s will is our will; that God’s ways are our ways; that the church is God. That would mean God would be made in our image and not the other way round. And I’m not interested in following me. I know my own flaws and they are many. I am interested in following the living God and by being transformed by kingdom priorities.

Anyway, back to the angels. Just as the angel who appeared after the Resurrection interpreted the event and then gave “the Marys” instructions, the same thing happens at this moment. The angels – messengers – confirm what the disciples have seen with their eyes and interpret it – making sense of the event by explaining God’s plan a bit – and what role they’re to take in it. That seems to be what Jesus himself spent a lot of time doing (remember that walk on the Road to Emmaus) and what the angels in the New Testament do. They interpret God’s ways to the rest of us who have a hard time laying hold of the reality of God’s imprint on this world.

So one of the things that I appreciate every year is that the experience of the Ascension didn't start off as something triumphant as in "Yay, Jesus has ascended to sit at the right hand of God!"

It started out as a big "huh?" And much like the Resurrection and all the post-resurrection appearances – 40 days worth – it took a while for the truth of what had happened, to sink in and make sense. The disciples needed a little interpretive help from these messengers of God to understand how all these events connected up. And I think we do too. So it's no bad thing to wonder about all that.

Because currently the Ascension of Jesus is just one of those things that is kind of assumed – it's in the creeds – in the bit where we trace the events of Jesus' life:

For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven:
 by the power of the Holy Spirit
 he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
 and was made man.
 For our sake he was crucified
 under Pontius Pilate;
 he suffered death and was buried.
 On the third day he rose again
 in accordance with the scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory
 to judge the living and the dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.

It's something we say. But we don't much focus on it. So, I have been trying to think through the feast of the Ascension with an inquiring mind this year. Sometimes it's really good to do this – to undergo a refreshment or a renovation of our beliefs. They can become so familiar and well-worn that we don't really engage deeply with them anymore. You know which ones are like that for you. Well, Ascension is one of those points in the year on the Christological cycle – the cycle of feasts that we have that help us mark out the life events of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour so that we're always living within time that's informed and shaped by our relationship with Jesus. Ascension comes 40 days after Easter and just before Pentecost. It is celebrated every year but not always on a Sunday. But it is contemplated and contended with every year.

So I guess one of the questions we have to ask is: what is the meaning of Jesus' presence and then, his absence?

I think the question about his continuing presence after the Resurrection is certainly one the disciples are asking and it takes the form of another question as they say: “Lord is this the time that you restore the kingdom to Israel?”

I get where that question is coming from. They were, as we are, in their time.

So they ask this geo-political question which is quite understandably tethered to their reality and their expectations –not to God’s reality. And they naturally think that Jesus has come to fulfill every faithful Jew’s dream of a restored Kingdom of Israel.

I get it. But the question is nevertheless, misguided – because although Jesus is in the world, he is not bound to their reality – or hopes.

The reality he’s bound to is much bigger. Because what’s going to break forth now is something they haven’t begun to anticipate. It’s not the world-bound restoration of the kingdom of Israel but the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth.

And what we see Jesus doing here is inviting the disciples to be part of something much larger, something perspective-altering, a way of thinking about and being in the world that is attuned to God’s ways, not our ways.

The disciples’ role (our role too as believers) in that, was just as Jesus said to them: to be witnesses of all that God has done in Jesus; to tell people about how God loves us; to be witnesses to the healing and forgiveness that God has offered us through Jesus; to tell people about a different way of life that is not only good for us, but good for the world; to tell people that when we’re being formed by God’s wisdom in the scriptures, in prayer, in worship, in each other, God can act through us all the time.

Jesus says go and tell that story – not just locally but to the ends of the earth.

They weren’t expecting that. In fact, they didn’t expect most of what Jesus said and did. All they could do was follow. Jesus’ message was so “other” so not us, that all they could do was to follow the living God.

And there’s a tremendous vulnerability in that – it’s obedient. The Acts of the Apostles shows us a church witnessing – telling people about Jesus - with an utter inability to know what’s coming next. That’s about all the strategic planning the church of God can do: follow. That’s the thing about building God’s kingdom, we have to listen and be dependent on God in order to know how to build it.

I think that’s the reality we’re really feeling in our dislocated days. How do we recognize the spirit of Christ among us in these days? These days which may last a long time? How is God leading us now – both individually and as the church?

Well, there's a lot of talk about re-opening our buildings. And I know we're eager to be together again. I am too. I miss being the gathered community of Jesus followers. And we will begin our return when it is safe to do so – and not a moment before. That I can promise you.

But. But I think we've begun to lay hold of a realization that may just have the power and possibility of renewing us profoundly for the future. Maybe to put it within the context of the Ascension readings it goes like this:

I have this fancy really that if those angels were to appear to us now – as we stand wondering what's next, and what we should do, they might say something like:

People of God why do you only look for Jesus in the church building? You've missed the point. You do know that the whole order of things is being reshaped? We are being resurrected into a new life – just like Jesus.

The Church is not a building. The people who make up the church are the bearers of Christ and Christ's healing and teaching in the world – each one of us.

This is how God through Jesus intends to transform the world through each person who collectively makes up the church. So what are we hearing in these confusing times? Go and play your part and witness. Today as ever, that's our job.

Jesus unites heaven and earth and he becomes the lens through which we see things. You see when God shows up, it's pretty clear that everything changes. And the Holy Spirit helps us with that reality – continually reveals Jesus and Jesus' ways to us – if we're listening.

One more thought for today: Pentecost comes after Ascension. That's kind of important. The disciples have to feel Jesus' present absence in order to understand and welcome the Holy Spirit. And they need the presence of the Holy Spirit in amongst them to become the Church - to be led and guided in building the kingdom.

We're no different. Where is the Holy Spirit leading us? That's the question. The question is not: where do we want to go? There's a difference and it lies in dependence and listening and discernment. It's not about us – or our mission – it's about God's mission. This isn't theology. It's an operating system.

So that's important. Often we can't tell the difference – and that's a problem. The Church is not Jesus and Jesus is not the Church. The Church is the gathered community of Jesus followers. Again, there's a difference.

If we say the church is Jesus, that's the same as claiming we can never be wrong. And we know that's not the truth. If we say we follow Jesus with the help and guidance of the holy Spirit, that's the truth. One way is humble and obedient even if it's hard - and allows God to direct us; the other runs the risk of being arrogant and wilful, not to mention deaf. That's a pretty important distinction if you ask me. And I know what church I want to be part of.

We are in the in-between times when the job of the church is to build the kingdom of God right here and now - either in buildings or physically distanced. And,

the kingdom will come as the church, energized by the Spirit, goes out into the world vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, celebrating:¹

advocating, giving and loving in Jesus' name.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ N.T. Wright http://ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Earth_Heaven.htm