

Ascension 2023

Acts 1:1-11, Luke 24:44-end

Father Christopher

Christianity could have gone the way of so many other rather niche sects that were around 2,000 years ago, just as so much of the world was awaiting apocalyptic deliverance. There aren't many followers of the cult of Mithras around these days. And from two or three hundred years later, who now follows the teachings of Manee? After all, Jesus taught in a very small part of the Roman Empire. He spent a bit of time in Jerusalem - how many times he visited rather depends on which gospel you read - but most of his teaching was done while wandering the imperial backwater of Galilee. Would a worldwide religion be likely to follow from a prophet who had spent his days trekking around the working men's clubs of Teeside? Unlikely.

And yet Jesus reaches a wider audience. How is this possible?

Well my answer to you today is that, rather counter-intuitively, it's because He's no longer there. It's because of His physical *absence* – because of His *disappearance* - that His message is able to take off in the way it does. Jesus's power is most gloriously revealed in his absence. And this paradox lies at the heart of our faith. While the Messiah who was expected was imagined to come with the armies of heaven in great strength, Jesus shows His strength in his humility, and in his disappearance.

Now Luke, who wrote both his gospel, but also the Acts of the Apostles, gives us two accounts of the Ascension. In the second, in Acts, as the disciples are gazing up into heaven after Him, two men in white robes suddenly appear. Does that remind you of anything? The empty tomb in John's account for example? Where two such men appear where Jesus's body lay, one at the head, and one at the foot. And now they appear again where He was before being lifted up into heaven. If they are angels, that is very appropriate, because angels are of course messengers. In place of Jesus's body, both His *dead* body at His resurrection, and then in place of His *risen* body in the Ascension, we find messengers.

Who do those messengers speak to? Well, they speak to the disciples, and say, '*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.*' But they do not just come to give a message. Jesus tells the disciples just before His ascension that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and that '*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*' From following Jesus in person, in one particular place, the disciples are to be given the power to go out across the whole world, something they could not do when following Jesus meant walking with Him from village to village in this tiny province.

Christianity, and the Church, are only possible as a movement which can transform the world, because of Jesus's absence, because He *leaves* His first disciples. Yes, there is the physical question: how else can Christianity spread, other than by the disciples spreading beyond where Jesus is in Galilee and Judea? That of course makes possible the conversion of all the peoples, in all the countries of the world. But by leaving Jesus also gives His followers responsibility.

We are to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which He promises, for we are now included, now that this rag-bag band of disciples starts to become the church. But the Spirit will enable us to discern, to exercise our free will in such a way as to draw closer to God; to walk in the ways of His Son; and to mould our life to the life that God would have us lead, in the way you might train a Clematis to follow a frame in your garden. But that's for another sermon, for a week on Sunday, and Pentecost, as we celebrate the forthcoming gift of the Spirit to those disciples. For now, we are left with them, standing there looking heavenwards, looking up into nothingness.

Some friends and I have been having a bible study on Zoom over the last few weeks, looking at the resurrection appearances of Jesus; and when we got to the Ascension in Luke I kept asking why Jesus led the disciples out to Bethany, from where He was lifted up. Why not stay in Jerusalem? And I think the answer is twofold: firstly, He has led them out of the city in order to make disciples of the world. But secondly, He has led them out, across the valley to this place on a hill looking over to Jerusalem, where His friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived. He has taken them to a familiar place, but also a place from where you get a great perspective. He has gone to a high place, from where the whole city and its surroundings can be seen (still, to this day, if now from behind the Israeli security wall).

In that place of sight, He does what most reveals Him as the Son of God: He blesses. Elsewhere His identity becomes clear as He blesses bread and wine, and fish, and now it becomes clear as He blesses His followers. And as so often happens when we see most clearly, at that moment of gift, He also disappears. But the vision remains, as does all that He has shown them in His life and death. They rejoice in that, for now they have all that they need for their salvation, and for that of the whole world.

By disappearing, Jesus is handing over the baton to his disciples; to the church; to *us*. To tell the world of His message of hope. To show the world what it is to serve. To show the world the joy we can have in repenting of our sins and beginning again. And to show the world what it is to encounter death; and to find only life and hope.

Amen