

This morning we are celebrating Ascension, – a few days late. Ascension falls exactly 40 days after Easter Sunday. The number 40 turns up frequently in the Bible – 159 times to be precise. The ark floated for 40 days; the Hebrews spent 40 years travelling from Egypt to Judea; Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness .... and so on; 159 times! And that is a definite signal that 40 has a meaning other than the obvious one. There is a lot of speculation about what meaning 40 carries, but for most purposes it boils down to ‘a long time.’

The church, however, takes 40 literally and so, since we start counting on Easter Sunday, the 40<sup>th</sup> day – Ascension – falls on a Thursday. We only have one other fixed Thursday in our calendar: Maundy Thursday. Large churches usually hold services on both of those Thursdays, but they don’t expect to be packed like Christmas! When I sang at a large church, we expected something like 35 people in the congregation on Maundy Thursday, but on Ascension, our priest would often peek into the church before the service, and say to the choir and clergy “Tonight we are singing for the angels and the archangels.” Which meant, of course, that there was nobody in the congregation!

Ascension is not one of the best known feast days on the calendar. Society ignores it, and it even goes by unnoticed by most Christians. The arrival of Jesus is a big celebration, but very few notice his departure. Of course, we all understand babies, even if their arrival is unusual, but ascension poses some really deep questions, and we just don’t have any language that works for it.

Luke’s version has Jesus being lifted up in a cloud. Our favourite paintings, and stained glass windows, and hymns all use the same image: Jesus going up to heaven. That worked well for people in previous ages, who accepted that heaven was up there and hell was down there, like a big layer cake.

But we modern types are pretty sure that if you go above the sky, you'll be in space, not heaven. For us, "up" doesn't work so well. But what could we use? "Elsewhere?" "Out of this dimension?" It's hard to think of something that would work. Perhaps that's why Ascension hasn't caught on as a big feast.

Today we heard the first few verses of the book of Acts, which is the second part of Luke's gospel. The first book begins with the birth of Jesus, and the second begins with the Ascension. The disciples had got used to the idea that Jesus was alive, and the great adventure was not over. They were ready to get going again, but were still thinking in the wrong framework. They were still thinking only of their own country and their own people. They were still thinking like followers.

Jesus answered them in a few short words. These were the last words he would say to them on this earth, and he told them three very important things:

- it is not given to you to know what will happen next, but
- it is your job to be witnesses to the whole world, and
- you will not be alone when you do it.

And then he was gone! No wonder they were standing staring at the sky. Perhaps they were hoping he'd be back in a few minutes. Perhaps they were hoping that he would come back and explain what he meant. But he had already said everything they needed to know in just those few words:

- it is not given to you to know what will happen next, but
- it is your job to be witnesses to the whole world, and
- you will not be alone when you do it.

It's no accident that Luke starts out this book with this story. His first book was all about Jesus and what he did, but his second is all about the disciples and what they did after he left. It's not called the thoughts of the apostles; or their prayers;

or their discussions; not even their opinions or their ideas. It's their ACTS.

Once they had understood what those last words of Jesus meant, they stopped worrying about what would happen next and they went out and became witnesses to the whole world. They became leaders instead of followers.

They didn't do it right away. For a little while they stood staring at the sky, until they were reminded that they couldn't stand there for ever. So they moved along, but they still didn't get started. They went home and huddled for a while. They prayed and talked and worshipped, but they kept it to themselves. They didn't have all the pieces yet.

Next Sunday we'll hear how the last piece came into place – how the Holy Spirit came to them 50 days after the resurrection, 10 days after the ascension. In those 10 days, they were struggling to understand what to do next. Next Sunday, they got it all together, but this Sunday they're stuck in that in-between time – not yet ready to go on, missing a few of the pieces, not quite understanding.

It doesn't matter whether it was literally 10 days—it could just as easily have been weeks or months, but we can recognize a common experience that hits most of us sooner or later. It usually starts with something tragic—some fundamental pillar in life is lost: a house burns down, a job is lost, a marriage disintegrates, a child gets ill or goes wrong, a spouse dies. Suddenly, everything that held life together falls apart, and we are left wondering what we are supposed to do next.

At first we react just as the disciples did. That picture of the disciples standing staring at the sky, frozen to the spot, is very recognizable. If you were drawing a cartoon of it, you would probably put thought bubbles above their heads, saying “What just happened?” “Why did that happen?” “Can we go back please?”

“Now, what are we supposed to do?”

There is a well-known illustration of the Ascension which shows something most don't show. It has the usual clouds and Jesus rising up in the sky, but it has something else—footprints; the footprints that Jesus made on the ground walking to that spot. The footprints trudge steadily forward to that spot and stop there. The disciples in the picture are looking up at the sky, but you know that when their necks get tired, sooner or later they'll look down again, and they'll see the footprints. They can't follow Jesus up into the clouds, no matter how much they want to. They can't stay forever in that moment wishing it had never happened. What they can do, and what they must do, is step into his footprints and move on.

They'll need some time to learn to live without his physical presence, to understand that he will always be with them in a different way. Time to pull the pieces together. Then they'll be ready to step into those footprints and move on.

There is a time for just staring at the sky; there is a time when that is the only thing we poor mortals are capable of doing. But in time we need to look back down at the earth and find the footprints that we must follow. It is not given to us to know what will happen next, but it is our job to be witnesses to the whole world, and we will not be alone when we do it.

Amen.