

## Witness and waiting

A sermon preached by Oxford Area Dean Revd Anthony Buckley on Ascension Day, 13 May 2021 in St Peter's Wolvercote

It is a great privilege to be here this evening. From Finland to Vanuatu, and in many countries in between, today has been a public holiday, Ascension Day is seen as special and significant across the world.

May I make an introductory point about not letting the limits of our language or of our imagination distract us from the central themes. I say this because I have come across people who are troubled by not being able to picture what happened on that mountain. They wonder about what Luke is describing when he wrote *When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*. It is an interesting ponder, but perhaps not terribly important in itself; inevitably, New Testament writers painted spiritually cosmic moments using earthly imagery (we do it all the time as well, but that can be another discussion). In a sense Bethlehem is easier, we know what a birth looks like – but how to describe our Lord returning to the Father in Heaven? C S Lewis aptly comments on imagery that appears elsewhere:

*"[A]n early peasant Christian might have thought that Christ's sitting at the right hand of the Father really implied two chairs of state, in a certain spatial relation, inside a sky-palace. But if the same man afterwards received a philosophical education and discovered that God has no body, parts, or passions, and therefore neither a right hand nor a palace, he would not have felt that the essentials of his belief had been altered. What had mattered to him, even in the days of his simplicity, had not been supposed details about celestial furniture. It had been the assurance that the once crucified Master was now the supreme Agent of the unimaginable Power on whom the whole universe depends. And he would recognize that in this he had never been deceived."*

And so to the significance. There is so much that we could say.

We may note the call to be witnesses, and perhaps dwell on the significance of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. (Jerusalem must have seemed a scary calling – it is only a few weeks since the crucifixion and Caiaphas is very much still in charge – and then there is Samaria - those Samaritans hate us). But the disciples followed this calling, and here we are today.

We may note the call to wait, and ask what role waiting has in our lives, and how do we handle those times when the calling seems simply to wait, pray and trust.

We may note the matter of fact response of the two men in white, presumably angels: *Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?* There are things that we can be doing now. We may know the old phrase of being too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. We cannot stay forever on the mountain, it is time to return to the valley, or in this case, the city.

But also that the promise of the return of Christ is clearly made. Again, let us not be distracted by the limits of our language as this is foretold. In the Church Year, Ascension looks to Pentecost, but it also looks to Advent.

We may even cheat slightly and look ahead further and ponder these words in the letter to the Hebrews:

*Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

Whenever we are feeling unsure, whenever we feel we are struggling, whenever we know we are in need, to remember that Christ prays for us is a great comfort. He prays for you, for me, right now.

Louis Berkhof comments

*"It is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us, even when we are negligent in our prayer life; that he is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers; and that He prays for our protection against the dangers of which we are not even conscious, and against the enemies which threaten us, though we do not notice it. He is praying that our faith may not cease, and that we may come out victoriously in the end."*

As the hymn-writer has it:

*Intercessor, friend of sinners, Earth's Redeemer, plead for me*

And he does.

So many points to consider, please forgive me for skating so quickly, or for leaving out your favourites. May I finish by noting one word that is mentioned in all three of our readings. The word is *power*.

In our Gospel reading Luke writes *And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

And then he uses the word again in our reading from Acts: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you*

Paul writes about *The immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.*

A laptop of mine once stopped working. I did everything I could, which was very little, and it still would not work. Eventually I phoned an emergency helpline, knowing that this might not be cheap. The kind gentleman appeared swiftly, had a quick look, then looked at the wall, and flicked a switch. In a dual socket I had plugged in the laptop on one side, and switched on the other side. He switched on the right side. Enough said...

The important thing about Luke and Paul's use of the word *power* is that it is not about our power, it is the Spirit's power. They know the laptop cannot work by itself, it has to be plugged in and the switch turned on. In fact, if the laptop thinks it can do it by itself, we have a problem.

Paul says – and this is such a huge statement – that God's power that is at work in us is the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

We in Wolvercote and Wytham are still in a time of waiting, albeit with happy expectation that Kate will be with us soon. We as a society are in a time of waiting, as one chapter of the pandemic seems to be drawing to a close, but still with some uncertainty about the future. Perhaps in our own lives we may be waiting for particular news or decisions. As we wait for Pentecost, may we remember that the most important waiting, alongside our waiting for the Lord's return itself, is the waiting for the power of the Spirit, to refresh, renew, restore us; to strengthen and enable us. To make us a little more like Jesus, this day and all days, and to be a blessing to the world.