

Sermon for Ascension Day, 9 May 2024

Revd Sharon Potter, Rural Dean

Acts 1.1-11; Luke 24.44-53

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

I think I've had enough of heights for today, so I'm not going to stand in the pulpit this morning. It is a great privilege to be here today as your rural dean and neighbour in Cockfield, to say a few words about the Ascension and this occasion of our our first Deanery Ascension Day service. How much nicer it is to come together to worship than to hold our individual benefice services on such an occasion, where we usually draw a crowd of about three and a dog. I would like to thank Lavenham for their hospitality, for inviting us, and for suggesting and organising everything today. I hope it will be the start of a tradition in the Deanery where we worship together and enjoy fellowship together, as well as the bacon butties; very much appreciated.

So here we are at the end of the Easter season, remembering Jesus's ascension to be with the Father. I'm sure we all come with our own image of what that day might have looked like. I sometimes think about the disciples gathering around Jesus before he ascended, knowing that he was about to leave them and anticipating the vacancy in a Messiah of human form, asking Jesus what they should do next. I can imagine Peter saying, 'Lord, what should we do? Open a café church or hold a pet service?' And Jesus looks up to heaven and says, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' I've just told that joke - it was a joke, you can laugh. It's nice to have a bit of humour in a sermon now and then - but I told it because of where we are as a church today. Sometimes we are so wrapped up in our initiatives that we forget our core purpose. We can find that at the end of Matthew's gospel when Jesus says, 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Of course, being Church means much more than that; and again, we all have our own ideas about what it means to be a member of God's Church.

But it is good, today of all days, to remember where it all started with the disciples, that disparate group of men and women, when we think about the wider group of Jesus's followers, who had seen Jesus intermittently in the days and weeks following the resurrection. It must have felt surreal as he appeared then disappeared, only to reappear again. He interrupted a conversation between Cleopas and his companion as they travelled the road to Emmaus. He had stood in the presence of the disciples and eaten with them. He was not a spirit, but the resurrected Christ, offering peace and hope for the future. In these times that we are living, where people are often searching for peace in the wrong kinds of places, this gift of God's peace is something that the whole world seeks. Jesus shows us beyond a doubt, to all who follow him, that he is the resurrected Christ; and it is in this context that we enter the ascension scene, and we become those witnesses of these things, as the disciples did on Ascension Day. It is we who are to tell others what we know about him, the good news of his ministry among us, and all that we have personally experienced through a life in Jesus Christ. The ascension is both an ending and a

beginning. It is the end of Jesus's time here on Earth and the beginning of our being witnesses and sharing the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

We don't do this in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised. And see, he said, 'I am sending upon you what my Father promises. So, stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' So Jesus is carried up into heaven, or as the Acts passage puts it, 'He was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.' As this is happening, those present watch and see two men in white appear. And these men 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.' It seems to me as if they are saying, 'Why are you still here? Don't just stand there. Go and do what Jesus has told you to do.' So as I say, the ending is also the beginning. The ascension of Jesus is in fact the beginning of the church, the presence of God in the world. God is going to use his disciples to spread the gospel beyond Jerusalem, in fact, to the very ends of the Earth.

The question for us today as witnesses is, in the face of all that's going on in our world, the turmoil, the conflict, the oppression, the suffering, the pain, do we have a message from God to share? And how can we be used in God's transformation of people's lives? The church has an incredible message to share that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour; but Jesus has defeated evil, that humanity has the opportunity to live an abundant life because of all that Jesus did on the cross. That is the good news. We do not share this work in our own strength, but we are promised the Holy spirit to empower us, to fill us up for our ministry, just as the disciples were promised. But we have to be open to that Holy Spirit; and when we are, God uses us to touch the lives of others. I know that many here among us want our church to grow, our churches to grow; but I also know that there are some who perhaps find that a frightening prospect. Newcomers mean change, and change is sometimes challenging. We think we know what worship means. We think we know what fellowship means. We think we know what serving the community means. But when our eyes and minds and hearts are opened by Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, we begin to understand a deeper truth that we have to take risks to open ourselves up to all sorts of possibilities that we could never have thought of in our own strength. When we recognise that the Holy spirit lives in us, then we can ask for the enabling power of the Spirit to help us to reach out and to share our lives and testimonies of faith in Christ with others. I have often been told that it is not the English way to share the very deeply personal reasons for believing in a God that cannot be seen. But I don't actually believe that anymore.

I have heard some very moving testimonies from all sorts of people in the church, from new converts to lifelong believers. Sharing our stories is what makes us human. And sharing our stories about faith is what makes us all evangelists. So this Ascension Day, as we meet together as a deanery, and may we do so more frequently in the future, let us pray for the Holy spirit to touch us and to open us up to more possibilities, for our own faith to grow deeper and stronger, and for us to be involved in things that might change lives or even, God forbid, transform the world.

For we are the ones who want to continue what Jesus started, to continue the work of prayer, of healing, of caring, being inclusive, and sowing seeds that will bear fruit as the Kingdom of God becomes a reality. Amen.