

Reflection for Sunday 24th May 2020 Ascension Sunday [Covid]

Thursday 21st May was Ascension Day – that day in the Christian calendar which comes 40 days after Easter and 10 before Pentecost. Ascension Day marks the end of Jesus' resurrection appearances and his departure from the midst of his followers.

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In one sense at least, Ascension Day might be thought to be one tinged with sadness. It commemorates a separation – and so – in a way – is the opposite of Christmas, which celebrates the Incarnation --- the presence of God in the world – as the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Christmas celebrates an arrival --- while Ascension highlights a departure. However, we must not take that comparison too far. Although Jesus is no longer physically present after Ascension – visible – audible – tangible – there remains a presence and a promise of a renewed presence through the coming gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Thursday of this past week was a day much anticipated across Scotland, though not, I think because it was Ascension Day. Rather, we were especially alert on Thursday because of the expected statement to be delivered by the Scottish Government regarding lock-down. As we listened to the First Minister and read through the published documents referred to as a road map for easing restrictions we were all acutely aware of our desperate desire to see those loved ones from whom we are currently separated. Doubtless – while respecting the decisions made --many of us felt a touch of disappointment that Phase 1 does not go further --as our hearts overruled our heads. But most of us – on reflection – will have moved on from disappointment to relief that at least some contact is likely soon to be possible. The politicians have been treading cautiously in very difficult terrain --- and we must be glad that they have been able to mitigate the pain of separation with a touch of hope.

Luke's Ascension account shows clearly that Jesus is acutely aware of the pain of separation. He has seen that pain in the faces of his friends who believed – understandably enough – that his crucifixion marked a final separation. He has witnessed some mitigation of that pain as he has made various resurrection appearances to his friends – but he knows that those appearances are about to end. So he does 2 things to offer further relief and mitigation.

1. He offers hope through the assurance that the Holy Spirit will come to be their mentor, guide and life-giving force.
2. He leaves them while he is in the process of blessing them.

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What is a blessing if it is not an overt expression of love and of compassionate concern?

What is a blessing if it not a gift of hope for the ones being blessed?

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Jesus departs in human form as he blesses his friends. It is a final gift of reassurance to mitigate the pain of separation.

Our second reading today is from Paul's letter to his friends in the Christian congregation at Ephesus. Ephesus, in Paul's day was a thriving, cosmopolitan city at a strategic point on the trade routes between east and west. Paul had spent some time there building up the congregation and now, from afar, he wants to encourage them amidst all the trials and adversity which faced the early Church.

Ephesians 1 verses 15 to 23 is one of my favourite passages in the New Testament and it contains 6 words which summarise its essence. Those words are:

"I remember you in my prayers"

He goes on to give detailed substance to that – in what is surely one of the earliest statements of faith. I encourage you to read it yourself. If you don't have a Bible, then just look online.

This passage from Ephesians is particularly appropriate for this time between Ascension [Last Thursday] and Pentecost [next Sunday] and that appropriateness is given wonderful emphasis by the initiative which is known as THY KINGDOM COME. Those three words from the Lord's Prayer have given name to a season in which Christians around the world and of all the major denominations are given encouragement and resources to pray. I have been posting details on our Facebook and website pages—which details include those about the smartphone app which brings all the resources to the palm of your hand. I cannot recommend it highly enough as a way to kickstart or to refresh and renew your prayer life.

At the heart of the THY KINGDOM COME initiative is that thing which Paul does as he writes to his friends in Ephesus. He thinks about them; he imagines their situation; he empathises

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with them and fills his heart with love for them. He formulates his hopes for them and then he sits down and writes to them.

And what does he write? “I remember you in my prayers”

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THY KINGDOM COME encourages you and me to do that same thing.

To sit down each day and think about up to 5 people who are special to us. We are invited to imagine them in our mind's eye; to empathise with them; to fill our hearts with love for them; to formulate Christian hopes for them ---- and then to remember them in prayer.

And – of course --- as we do so – we are encouraged to include ourselves.

This time of separation brings particular pain to each one of us. How can we serve to mitigate that pain – to reduce it and counter it? Well – not least – we can pray that the fruit of the Spirit will be abundantly evident in our lives – so that we might affect others for good – and bring light and hope to their lives. As we were reminded last week – our actions and our attitudes deeply affect those around us. Our attitudes and our actions will become blessings --- when they are rooted in the Spirit of God.

So – why not give it a go yourself in this period between Ascension and Pentecost? And why not get a hold of some of the resources offered by Thy Kingdom Come. I guarantee that they will be of help and benefit in kick starting or in refreshing and renewing your prayer life. That prayer Thy Kingdom Come is – of course --- a prayer for the whole of creation -- it is universal in its scope --- but great oaks from tiny acorns grow --- and the prayer of God's heart which he has taught us to say will only be fulfilled when it is embraced by every individual heart.

“I remember you in my prayers” Why not make that true today for some of the folk you love? And if you do --- why not tell them?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen