

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Ascension Sunday*

*Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020*

*Living in the in between – Being witnesses to our hope in Christ*

What are you like at waiting?

We're all learning about it in this in-between time, between lockdown and what life will be like on the other side.

This is also true for the disciples as Jesus ascended into heaven.

Here they are finding themselves in between one time and another.

Having been with Jesus as he taught and healed, apart from him in death, reunited with him in his resurrection and now this! Now they are called beyond what they can see – to become witnesses to Jesus.

In Luke's account in Acts, the last thing he says to them is 'you will be my witnesses' as he promptly disappears from them.

The Ascension of Christ is often a difficult feast for us to get our heads around perhaps because it seems irrational to us.

We don't have a three tiered view of the world any longer where heaven was above, then the earth and hell beneath.

Yet you could call this the feast of the in-betweens as the focus shifts from Jesus to his followers.

The Ascension is about Jesus.

It tells us that Jesus as God's Son is exalted on high, the highpoint if you like of the resurrection and all that has come before.

He is now at the right hand of the Father and God has put all things under his feet, above all rule and authority as Ephesians 1 says.

Yet this power and authority is not as we think of it.

It is the authority of suffering love lifted high on the cross, the power of vulnerable love and that this is in the very heart of God.

Jesus is raised from the dead and in his humanity is exalted into heaven.

In his humanity he takes us all with him, lifting us with him, as humanity is taken into the heart of God.

It is a lifting up of love over suffering, offering us a glimpse of the future where death is no more, where we are raised above the sufferings of the present time.

Jesus has completed what he was called to do and now like Moses and Elijah before him is transformed.

We are called to lift up our eyes and hearts not just to heaven but also to see how heaven is on earth in God's call to us now.

The Ascension is also about us as God's people.

As Jesus disappears from view, their heads raised the disciples are left with instructions ringing in their ears about what is next.

They have been told to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father, and to be witnesses.

The shift is coming – learning to live with the physical absence of Jesus and yet still present, living in their hearts.

Here is the pivot – as they wait, their limited vision will be expanded.

When the Spirit comes they will become who they are called to be.

We too are called to be witnesses of the hope to which Christ has called us (Ephesians 1.18).

We are all in an in-between time in these days of COVID. We've got used to doing things differently very quickly, zooming around and livestreaming to remain in contact.

We are now beginning to think about what is next, like the disciples were.

We are not quite sure what that will be like.

In the end no matter what the future looks like the call will be the same – to witness to the hope that we are called to.

This hope is about being connected to each other and that God is with us always, and cares for us and for all.

Caring is about praying for others and also about being present with others.

Leigh Sales wrote a book called *Any Ordinary Day: Blindsides, Resilience and What Happens after the Worst Day of Your Life*, exploring how one recovers from trauma both for herself and those she interviews who have been through devastating experiences.

What she discovers is not just suffering, but resilience and hope and people who had grown in themselves.

One of the things that she comes to realise in her conversations with people is the importance of someone being present to listen, to accompanying them through what this worst time in their lives.

Perhaps to witness then is actually about showing up and being present. This is what Jesus did on the cross and resurrection.

In Jesus God was present totally through the worst that life, suffering and death could do and present in new life and beyond and still alive within us now. As Matthew's gospel puts it 'I am with you always to the end of the age'.

To be a witness is to be present to God in worship and praise.

Our worship lifts our hearts and raises our spirits to be aware of God's loving presence each day.

It is also about being present with others through what they are going through. In a time of physical isolation and in between we can still be with others.

How are you really present to others in your life in a way that is loving?

We are God's witnesses as we notice where God is present.

God turned up in Jesus alongside those who were vulnerable and in need.

When I think of Jonathan and the stories I've heard, he made such a powerful impact on so many people by simply being present.

He listened and asked the questions that helped and encouraged people to see ahead.

It reminds me of what a difference one person can be to another.  
This is something that we can all do.

*Blessing*

In the leaving  
in the letting go  
let there be this  
to hold onto  
at the last:

the enduring of love  
the persisting of hope  
the remembering of joy  
  
the offering of gratitude  
the receiving of grace  
the blessing of peace.

—Jan Richardson

*Lections:*  
*Acts 1.1-11*  
*Psalm 47*  
*(Ephesians 1.15-23)*  
*Matthew 28.16-20*