

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury (Picnic)

Ascension Sunday C

Sunday 29 May 2022

Being Carried into the Heart of God

This story reminds me about how hard farewells are.

It is so awkward when you know that someone is leaving a job to go somewhere else or moving house. You are leaving a group of people you have got to know very well.

It raises questions for the one leaving. Will they manage without you? It is a time of letting go, of change and grief.

For the ones staying how will they manage?

What will the future look like?

It is why retirement can be so challenging for people.

Both the disciples and Jesus are going through such a change.

This is like Jesus' retirement party.

Jesus has done all he came to do. It is finished.

It is time for him to retire at the grand old age of 33 and exit stage left.

He's leaving the field. I wonder how he felt about it?

I wonder whether he was relieved? or sad?

Did he wonder whether they would manage?

Jesus' words to them are like a handover file – giving them some guidance to work out what to do next.

I wonder what the disciples felt – gratitude, sadness – probably both!

They probably wondered how they would cope without his physical presence.

If we think Christmas is a big feast the feast of Ascension is just as big.

Both of these feasts are about massive changes in how we see ourselves and how we see God.

The birth of Jesus and the Ascension are bookends to the life, death and rising again of Jesus.

They are the stories of God being with us and us being with God.

The birth of Jesus, what we call the incarnation is about God coming to be with us.

God comes to share our human life in all its frailty and limits.

The ascension of Christ is about Jesus taking all of humanity to be with God.

As Jesus returns to the Father, in the ascension Jesus embraces every single person and takes them into the heart of God to be at home with God forever.

All of life is taken into the heart of God, carried into the heart of God.

It reminds me of the e e cummings poem about love which begins.

*I carry your heart with me (I carry it in
my heart) I am never without it (anywhere
I go you go, my dear; and whatever is done*

*by only me is your doing, my darling)
I fear.*

I realise that when I have left a job or moved parishes, I continue to carry those people in my heart always and they are still with me (even though it is different).

None of us like leavings and farewells but it is often in that time of change and transition that I have realised how much people have meant to me and how much I have meant to them, and this is all about love and belonging.

They are powerful times where each of us carry each other in our hearts.

I wonder if that is what is happening in the ascension of Jesus as he retires and leaves his companions and friends physically.

How do we handle times of transition and change?

I think this story gives us some clues.

Remember and tell the story of the time together and name what it means. There is the reassurance that God is at work in these times.

Jesus tells them not to leave Jerusalem and to wait there for the Father.

There is wisdom in waiting in place where you are.

To wait is not easy, and you often don't want to or see what it means, but to wait where you are and listen to yourself and each other is valuable.

It helps us to be open to the promise of the Father.

We can only do that from where we are right now.

Waiting with patience and with joy for the Holy Spirit, the spirit of renewal which will come.

We wait for the new ways Jesus is with us and how we are with God and learn to trust in it.

We wait in hope that God meets us where we are, and we can trust that we are carried in the heart of God just as we carry God in our hearts.

here is the deepest secret nobody knows

(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud

and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows

higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)

and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

Brian Wren's hymn says something similar.

*Jesus is with God,
endlessly alive.*

*All he did and said and suffered,
all he hoped and all he offered
beats with shimmering wings
in the heart of things.*

*Jesus is with God
where the victims cry
from the crosses of oppression,
praying for our intercession:
"Leave your nets, and see!
Christians, follow me!"*

*Jesus stands with God
by an open door,
calling us to pray and follow
through the struggles of tomorrow,
sowing hopeful seeds
where the Spirit leads.*

*Lectio:
Acts 1.1-11
Psalm 110
Ephesians 1.15-23
Luke 24.44-53*