

Homily 2 Ascension –Canon Alson Tyler

We celebrate again today the last of Jesus's resurrection appearances when he comes again to the disciples. He had first appeared to them on the day of his resurrection, Easter day, and several times since over the next 40 days . He has assured them that he has risen from the dead and has showed them the marks of his crucifixion, in his hands and feet and his side. At first, they doubted; but they came to believe that it really was Jesus, their Lord and Master and that he really had risen, though his body was still marked with the signs of his suffering.

Today, marks an ending and a beginning, for the last time, the Risen Lord Jesus physically appears to the disciples and a cloud takes him from their sight. The resurrection appearances of Jesus end here, and the life of Church will begin very soon after. Before he leaves them, Jesus reassures them again that they will receive strength from on high, enabling them to fulfil their commitment to him, giving them the confidence and courage, they need, and do not yet have, to proclaim his message for all to hear. 'You will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' The great story begun at his birth goes on, through his suffering, death and resurrection and now his Ascension and, as we know, when the Holy Spirit comes it will spread through all time and to every nation.

There is a really good story about the Ascension, sadly its not my story but Lucy Winkett quoted it in the Church Times last week, so I can share it with you. Jesus arrives in heaven after the agonising events of Holy Week and his resurrection appearances. At the gates Michael, the Archangel (Peter who is still alive hasn't got to heaven yet) asks Jesus how it went, and Jesus says all was as it should have been: "I've left Peter and Mary, John, James and another Mary to carry on. Sounds good Michael says, "but obviously you've left them with the programme, the strategy, the timelines, and the budgets to make sure what you did is rolled out and not wasted?" Jesus looks at Michael and says: "I have made no other plans".

The coming of the Spirit that wild, unruly, unpredictable spirit is the plan.

It is very hard to get a grip on Ascension Day because images of feet disappearing into clouds, as in the Shrine Church at Walsingham, may raise a smile, but do not get us very far.

This is the moment when the disciples actually had to step up and start to take responsibility for the ministry entrusted to them by Jesus, it is the last moment of Jesus's physical presence with them. It really is time for the disciples to become independent, to make decisions and get organised, Jesus has made no other plans, but they may need to, as he will not be there again in the same way to sort things out. Clearly, though Jesus would not have left them if he did not know and believe that they would receive the Holy Spirit and that they would indeed be equipped by the Spirit for mission and ministry.

He does not leave them then, without a double dose of support, he takes with him in his human and resurrected body the scars of his earthly life and of his suffering straight to the father, and so with him the knowledge and experience of all our

human suffering. Jesus is Emanuel God with us, and by accepting and bearing his suffering. he bears all our human suffering and is with us in new and deeper ways, as he returns to the Father, so we need not be alone in our pain. And then there is the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, the Comforter and when the spirit comes, the Church really takes off. Not so much like a plan but more like an explosion of God's power active in the world.

Jesus ascending into the cloud is a powerful image its of Jesus being received into glory, returning to be with God because a cloud is often a symbol of the glory of God.

And so, the Church begins, with complete conviction from the disciples that Jesus is raised from the dead, that Jesus is alive, and that in the cloud of the Ascension he is exalted to the glory of God.

And now we wait, as the disciples waited for the coming of the Spirit, "And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." They were waiting to be baptised in the spirit, John baptised with water by immersion in the Jordan river, we baptise with water both by immersion and otherwise, but when the spirit comes, we and the disciples will all be baptised, and not just with water, we will be drenched, and soaked with the strength and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and set on fire with love for God and for the world. Jesus is the more powerful one of whom John the Baptist said, "I baptise you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". So, no wonder they were so joyful praising God in the Temple they were expecting great things.

'You will be my witnesses' Jesus said this and the Church is called into being at Pentecost to point to Jesus, to speak and act to for him in a way that shows his mercy, justice and love. The Church is to point to Jesus locally, in Jerusalem for the disciples, and wherever we are for the rest of us. That isn't always easy, among the people we know, especially in our increasingly fragmented, complex and divided society, both locally and nationally. And the Church is to witness to Jesus to the ends of earth, as a worldwide Church with a worldwide commission to be witnesses to him in our words and in our actions, in the midst of war and conflict, pandemic and mistrust. This is where Church starts – with a commission to be witnesses, Witnesses to the God who loves us without limit and is always with us, and witnesses to the saviour who died for us. Amen