

Head and Heart

5th May 2024
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Sunday before Ascension

Readings

Acts 1: 1 - 11
Psalm 298
Ephesians 1:15 - 23
Luke 24: 44 - 53



The Ascension celebration next Thursday is as usual, set amid the busyness of a working week. It is good to have this Sunday to reflect on what it means. The ascension of Jesus Christ is after all the climax of our Lord's life and ministry and the remembrance of his return to the glory of the Father. It also reminds us of his new, every day, everywhere presence in the world. Maybe that is the significance of its celebration on a weekday as well as it being forty days after Easter. Jesus is with us always – everyday. A past poet laureate, John Masefield captured that meaning in his drama *The Trial of Jesus*. He depicts the arrival of Longinus, the centurion who had been in charge of Jesus' crucifixion and is now reporting to Pilate. Procula, Pilate's wife, who previously had had disturbed dreams about Jesus' condemnation, asks to see Longinus. She asks him, *Do you think he is dead? No, Lady*, the centurion replies. *'Then where is he? Procula asks. Let loose in the world, Lady, he says, where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth!*

In the Acts account by Luke, Jesus met his apostles and many other followers on the mount of Olives where they saw him walk away into the low clouds. *Up into heaven*. That doesn't necessarily mean 'up there' where he and vast hosts of others peer down on us mortals lovingly or critically, but up into the unseen – *out of the 'here' into the 'everywhere'*. He has returned to that life with the father of which the psalmist wrote, (*Psalm 139*) *You and your power are all around me – your knowledge of me is deep. If I travel to the farthest East or West, you are still there for me. There's nowhere I cannot find you!* Jesus had prepared the apostles for this moment in many appearances during the six weeks after his resurrection. He met them in different ways and places, talking to them about God's Kingdom and reminding them of his teaching. In the gospel reading Luke tells how Jesus had appeared to the apostles and two breathless excited friends who had rushed back all of seven miles from Emmaus. He opened their minds to understand his words, explaining how his cross and suffering, and his rising to life is all bound up with their essential message of repentance, forgiveness, new life .. and his whole world vision.

I imagine the twelve had many questions - like the one Luke recalls, *Is it now then, that you will establish your reign as King of Israel?* Jesus replies firmly, *That's the Father's business. You have a far greater work to do than just here in this land. You must stay in Jerusalem, till God' Spirit comes and prepares you to move out to all Judaea and Samaria and on again and again to the ends of the earth!* Through succeeding centuries his word has spread across all continents – and Jesus in his ascended power has been there waiting for there! In every heart and home prepared to receive him, he is waiting still.

I love the way Luke concludes his Ascension account with a scene and words which should be written on every church or chapel wall. The apostles and others stand gawping at the mount of Olives, looking for breaks in the clouds, when two men in white – angels – are suddenly with them out of the *everywhere*. They ask, *What are you doing here? Jesus who you know will come again. He is everywhere! His Spirit's here with you now and will be with you always. You cannot escape him or his call to witness to his words and his love, wherever you are and whatever it may cost. What are you waiting for?*

Almost every day now I am discovering new terms and phrases – like *macro-vision*. I didn't hear it at the opticians, although I could have done. I discovered it is a term used of studies and training programmes which teach how to get the 'long view'; how to maximise your opportunities and aim towards achieving your potential 'lifegoal'. The Ascension of Jesus is our *macro-vision*. It's the most challenging, encouraging vision of winning the world for Jesus. I thought of my college motto, which we saw most days, clearly carved into the chapel communion table – *Pro Christo et Ecclesia* – for Christ and the church. The college had a long overseas tradition and 'church' embraced the immense view of the whole 'world-church'.

The apostle Paul had 'macro-vision' as he wrote to the church at Ephesus telling the believers there about his prayers for them. He was proud of their growth in faith and love. He wanted them to receive richer experiences of the Spirit, enabling them to grow in God's wisdom - not just knowing about him, but entering a personal relationship with him. Paul wanted his people to know the ascended greatness of Jesus as 'the Lord'. He is greater than any earthly power or authority. He is, as God, supreme over all things, all people, all nations – everywhere! Power, authority and control dominate our societies, personally, politically, economically How much I want to share Paul's prayer for a macro-vision church today – for 'angels in the pews' who will keep the large, long-view open – *Why are you standing, or sitting there. Jesus is Lord, ascended and glorified – he's out in the world waiting for us to meet him!*

A Prayer based on Psalm 98

Lord, fill my mind and heart with the powerful greatness of Jesus' ascended glory, linking earth and heaven.

Teach me heaven's new song of praise,
for the wonderful things you have done
and given us through Jesus.

Let the whole world hear the song of your glory,
In choirs and orchestras
In the songs of the birds and cries of creation
In the wind across pastures
In the roar of the oceans and the rippling of running
streams.

May all people hear, feel and know both the gentle comfort
and the challenging demands of your love.

