24th May 2020

Psalm 47
Luke 24.44-53

# He parted from them

One of my favourite films this year has been the ‘*Two Popes’*. Jonathan Price played a convincing Cardinal Jeorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, and Anthony Hopkins gave a charming performance of Pope Benedict. It was an affectionate film and I hope some of it was true!

It charted those years when one Pope felt the need to retire yet waited until he sensed his unlikely successor was willing to step up and take over. It was a film about endings and new beginnings and, in a way, that’s what the Ascension is all about too.

Valerie read to us Luke’s Ascension narrative and it has the dynamic of one of these transitional moments – an event marking the reality that after it nothing would be quite the same again – the end of one era and the beginning of something fresh and tantalisingly new.

Perhaps we feel those dynamics in our lives today. I sometimes think I’ll end up looking back on my time as a minister of AFC as a ministry of two halves: pre and post Virus.

The Ascension, forty days after Easter, is described as taking place near Bethany on The Mount of Olives and is sometimes considered to be one of the five pivotal events in Christ’s life, alongside his baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion and resurrection.

I think those forty days between the resurrection and ascension were days of great significance. Jesus made the most of these bonus days. So instead of an abrupt ending on the evening of a very turbulent Easter Day we have this calmer time frame. An opportunity for relationships to be restored, assurances given and fellowship enjoyed. These were the days of unexpected appearances and never to be forgotten barbeques on a beach at breakfast time.

Perhaps one of the greatest healing moments during these forty days takes place as Peter is re-instated. *Do you love me*, says Jesus three times – with echoes of a courtyard denial not so far away – Peter said he did – so was re-commissioned with the words, then *feed my sheep*.

In the hymn, *Lord for the years*, there is that haunting line: *Past put behind us, for the future take us...* Perhaps that’s what was going on between the Empty Tomb and The Mount of Olives. The past was being dealt with, questions answered and old wounds bound up. And this extra month seems to have been as vital as any that made up the proceeding three years.

This is Jesus taking his time – and perhaps it’s Jesus telling us to take our time too. We sometimes talk of ‘slow faith’. Not rushing in our prayers and exploration but living with the questions.

These last few months have probably ‘slowed’ us all down in many ways. It was the Queen, who in her Easter audio message, spoke of the valuable opportunity we’ve all unexpectedly been given for reflection during these days of Lock Down. These are not lost days but ones when in which we can explore and deepen our faith.

I like to think of Jesus not rushing back – but lingering deliberately and lovingly – spending these forty days with his disciples dealing with the past and preparing for the future – valuing ‘slow faith’.

Now Luke describes the Ascension using an interesting turn of phrase in his gospel. He says: *Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and blessed them with uplifted hands; and in the act of blessing he parted from them.*
His leaving wasn’t after the blessing it was, says Luke, actually integral to it, part of the blessing itself. The actual act of blessing included his leaving.

And this makes it, I think, even more significant. It wasn’t as if he was covering up his unfortunate departure with a sort of sticking plaster prayer as if to make it alright. It was quite the opposite – he viewed his ascension in a supremely positive light. One of the ways he could now bless his followers was actually to leave them.

I suspect we’ve all known the reality of this sort of moment. In a way it’s often the gift of our absence that can make good things happen. That trainee at work that we’ve been spending so much time with showing the ropes – we’re called away unexpectedly and they have to manage by themselves. We think they couldn’t possibly survive - but return the next day to find that in fact they’ve flourished.

That teenager about to go off on a camping holiday with friends – without mum and dad – however will he cope? He returns home breezily saying all went well desperately trying to pretend that he missed his parents lots!

Letting go is part of what the Ascension is all about. Jesus, after an astonishingly short time, for three years of training for these fishermen disciples hardly seems enough to turn them into apostles of the Church of Christ, Jesus lets them go.

It’s as if he’s saying to them – you know what to do – we’ve been together walking and talking, sharing meals and crises – you know what to do and how to live that life of love and faith. Now just do it! You’ve seen the way I live – now you must carry on living like me. I’m handing the baton on – I’m letting go.

The other day I went into the quiet stillness of the sanctuary at AFC. I sat and watched the flickering sunlight shine down upon the communion table. All was hushed as if the building was waiting for our return to embrace us once again as a House of Prayer. As I walked out I saw that, still in the pouches either side of the doorway, there were a few copies of the sermon notes left – dated 15th March 2020 – I gulped!

I remember that service and hardly being able to pronounce the blessing, sensing that it would be some time before we met like that again.

Yet, the truth is we have stayed together and prayed together. In ways that are both familiar and new to us, sometimes even picking up old and new friends along the way, we have continued to be both a worshipping and serving Fellowship of God’s people.

I love the story, and I know I tell it far too often, of Abraham Lincoln saying farewell from the train at the station of his little town as he sets off for his Inauguration in Washington. He says to his friends and neighbours who had come to see him off: *The God who goes with me - is the same God who stays with you.*

On March 15th it’s as if we left church commissioned now to put into practise all we have learnt and shared together – we would have to do that now as individuals but the great truth we held in our hearts, that has sustained us these last nine weeks and will sustain us for however much longer the Virus keeps us apart, is that God went with us and has stayed with us ever since.

This morning we have been with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, he promises the Spirit, he commissions all disciples to be his witnesses, and then, in the words of Luke: with uplifted hands – and in the act of blessing – he parted from them.

Both an end and a beginning!

May you today know the blessing and joy of the Ascended Christ resting upon you in all you do. Amen

*Ian Green, Ascension Day, 21st May 2020, Amersham*