# *A picture containing symbol, font  Description automatically generated*21st May 2023

**Psalm 47** O.T. p 476 **Acts 1.1-11** N.T. p.101

## Ascension Sunday – Passing on the Baton

**Introduction to the theme:**
Last year I was speaking to some friends whose church had just gone into a Pastoral Vacancy. Now these are always interesting conversations for me, because although I’ve caused a few in my time, I’ve never actually lived through a Vacancy. So, I was interested in their reactions of having a minister who was much loved and stayed a long time but now was no longer serving among them.

Their overall reaction was a realisation that during his time there he had personally taken on board more and more jobs, many behind the scenes, so that when he went it came as a real shock to them how much they would now have to pick up and take on for themselves. Maybe, they said, with hindsight, we should have shared out the tasks during his ministry, not after it.

Well, that reminded me of a minister friend of mine that sometimes speaks of *the gift of her absence.* And by that I suppose she means that she has, wisely, never tried to do all the jobs in a church just by herself. Instead, she has positively encouraged others to do what she cannot, either because she’s not at everything, and even when she is it’s better to have team work that a one person band.

Today we are going to be thinking of the Ascension of Jesus, basically his *Goodbye Moment* with his disciples. For them, from now on, the challenge will be how to both live with his absence yet sense his presence at the same time.

The Ascension is a moment of departure for Jesus, but it isn’t the end of the story of Jesus. Our task this morning, in sermon and reflection is to try to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory ideas.

**Sermon**
*Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Ascension, being forty days after Easter, falls on a Thursday, which instantly relegates it to a minor, or even totally forgotten, festival for most of us. Hence my cunning plan to elevate it by giving it its own Sunday, the one before Pentecost.

It belongs to the myth stories in the gospels whose reason for being in the narrative isn’t historical but theological. They are stories which make a point, and they often share in common what might be described as a glimpse, as it were, between worlds; they cross a boundary line between the ordinary and the dazzling, be they the story of Jesus’ Baptism and the voice from heaven, the Transfiguration and that glimpse of heaven or the Ascension and this departure to heaven.

I’m struck by the way that some of these stories have companion narratives that are, in a way, essential if we are to make sense of them. So, the baptism of Jesus is coupled with his temptations. The ascension is followed ten days later by Pentecost. And that’s rather like the festival we have just gone through last month, of Good Friday and Easter Day, both needing the other to make sense of the whole.

The Ascension is coupled with Pentecost. One speaks of the departure of Jesus, the other of the arrival (in this form, at least) of the Holy Spirit.

And have you noticed, as with so much that we view as intrinsically Christian, just how much the stories of Ascension and Pentecost rely upon a Jewish narrative with all this talk of 40 and 50 days. The Christian Whit Sunday is set in the context of Pentecost, one of Judaism’s mini–Harvest Festivals.

I don’t think we need to be conflicted here. Surely it is reassuring to affirm that the Christian story comes out of the Jewish one and that God’s love and justice is so clearly seen in the stories of the 39 books that make up what we call *The Old Testament.* God has been present throughout all of history, whether the years carry the suffix BC or AD.

And we believe the same about the Ascension. God was both present before and after it.

The change of emphasis in today’s gospel is in the agency of The Kingdom. Up to now it’s Jesus who has been speaking of what it means to live with Godly values – in describing this he uses the shorthand word *Kingdom.* Indeed, the focus has been so much on Jesus in the gospels because for us he is the very embodiment of those Kingdom values. That’s why we love the stories of Jesus and repeat them so often, for they show us how to live.

Yet, after the Ascencion the agency of The Kingdom shifts from Jesus to us. We are called to proclaim and live out these Godly values.

Therea of Avila, the Spanish Carmelite Nun from the 1500’s put it beautifully in her wonderful prayer:

*Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Yours are the feet with which he walks
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*And that, in a sense, is a response to the question asked of the disciples in the passage when the angels say: *Why are you standing there gazing up into heaven…*

Perhaps less poetically than Saint Theresa the angels might have gone on to say: *Don’t just stand there, but step up and take up – you know what to do, Jesus has trained you for three years, he’s now gone, so now, from today onwards, it’s over to you. This now becomes your moment to be Christ’s hands and feet.*And, in a sense, don’t we naturally understand this dynamic and see it working out in other areas of our lives too.

For the Ascension has elements of parting that are common to us all whenever someone we love dies. There is that moment when they pass, from being held by us to being held by God. And we miss them, their voice, their presence, their smile and their touch.

Yet, again and again I hear at funerals, in tributes given by family members, that those who loved them most already feel that something of a nana, a father, a wife or a friend, is living on in the traditions of that family or friendship group. We, all of us, know what it means to be continually inspired by those who are no longer with us. How often do we sit at a family gathering and think *Grandad would have loved this,* or sing a hymn in church and instantly recognise it as our late friend’s favourite.

For we do, in so many ways, *stand on the shoulders of giants,* people who have helped to form us and the world in which we live, and we continue to draw strength from their example.

That’s what *tradition* is! It isn’t something dusty but living. St Paul talked of tradition when he wrote in Corinthians of Communion and said: *That which I received from the Lord, I passed on to you…*It's about *passing on the baton.*

I don’t know about you, but I’m utterly transfixed when I see films, say from the 1st World War, that have been digitalised so that people can now be seen walking at the right speed and in colour. Suddenly folk who lived a hundred years ago look so like us today. Their world and our world is the same world. We share their sorrows, feel their longings and join in with their hopes. For we are all walking on sacred ground, as others have trodden this path before us, striving to live with the Godly values of The Kingdom.

We take up the baton, just as the disciples were call to at The Ascension.

Just before Christmas last year I met an old college friend for lunch and that afternoon, pretending we were still sprightly twenty-year-olds we climbed to the top of the dome at St Paul’s. We almost needed resuscitation at the top!

Our audio guide told us, by the time we got to the Whispering Gallery that Sir Christopher Wren lived just long enough to see his masterpiece completed. Yet in his closing years he couldn’t make the stairs so they put him in a builder’s basket and hauled him up to the gallery so he could look down at the Cathedral Crossing.

I lingered at that spot, chiefly to catch my breath, but wondered what the great architect might have said. Perhaps something like: *So, I’ve built you a great church, a Cathedral church for London, now fill it with people, sing God’s praise, listen for God’s words and pray to him. I’ve given you the framework, now fill it with love, joy and service.*I think on Ascension Sunday, as if from a great height, I hear Jesus say something similar to us.

I’ve left you an example. I’ve given you a framework. I’ve shown you what The Kingdom looks like. Members of Amersham Free Church, now it’s up to you. My Spirit will help you find the words and live the life. Fill this town, this church, this family with love, speak words of peace, go the extra mile, look out for the fragile and struggling among you, struggle with injustice and try to make a better way – live the life of Jesus and the Godly values of the Kingdom.

And even as we see him go, as it were into the cloud, we realise once again that the story of Jesus hasn’t ended. And if the angel asked us What we are looking for as we gaze into the sky, perhaps we might reply, we are looking at Jesus the author and pioneer of our faith, we are remembering Jesus, longing for a touch of his spirit so that we, his disciples in 2023 can continue his story and live out the Godly values of his Kingdom.

May God’s Spirit bless us all as we seek to make good that vow. In name of our Risen and Ascended Lord. Amen *Ian Green Amersham 19th May 2023*