

## **A Reflection from The Revd Andrew Haines on The Ascension (Part 2) Acts 1:1-11**

Last week we focussed on Word and worship; seeing how the disciples learned from Jesus how the Hebrew Scriptures all pointed forward to Him, and then how, in response, they were filled with a sense of wonder and worship. We also saw how the resurrection and ascension can be seen as two aspects of the same event. We will explore this a bit more now, and then think of the presence and call of God which flow from that event.

Jesus appeared to the disciples and various others over a period of forty days. We note that, in those appearances, the disciples did not always recognise him immediately, but that recognition often came through a word spoken, or action performed, by him. He could also appear and disappear at will, and locked doors were no barrier to him. Yet Jesus invites the disciples to touch his wounds, and he eats and drinks with them. How can these things be? Maybe our minds have been taken in by the fictional adventures of the TV series Star Trek, whose characters could be 'beamed down', or up, from one place to another, at the flick of a switch. But Star Trek is modern fiction; Jesus is real, and these things happened two thousand years ago.

We need to understand that, at the resurrection, Jesus did not simply come back to life. Rather, he went through death and beyond it to a new way of living that is free from the constraints of time and space. This brings us to the question of where heaven is. It has often been assumed, wrongly, that heaven is somewhere entirely separate, where we hope to go when we escape from this corrupt and broken world. But heaven is not a distinct 'other' location; it is wherever God is. And God promises that, in the fullness of time, He will create new heavens and earth, and the two will be joined under the kingship of Jesus, and to his praise and glory. Although heaven and earth now appear to be separate, yet we see again and again that the power of heaven is seen on earth, especially in Jesus, and in him the earthly is lifted into heaven.

Luke tells us that Jesus was taken up in a cloud. This is significant because frequently in the Old Testament clouds are used as symbols for the presence of God. An early Christian mystic wrote a spiritual work called 'The Cloud of Unknowing'. Clouds form a veil, or a barrier. They are used in the Old Testament to protect human eyes from the glare of the full glory of God. So at the Ascension, Jesus is taken up not through a freak weather event, but through and into the immediate presence of God. The disciples could be aware of the presence, but could not fully see or comprehend it. It is little wonder that they remained looking into the sky even when the cloud disappeared. They know that at that moment, and through the preceding three years, they had been in the presence of God. But what would happen next? There are occasions when the Old Testament laments that the voice and presence of God were absent. They were always dark and difficult times. Would it be so again?

Those of us who have been around for a while will remember the early days of the credit-card industry in this country. One of the earliest cards to be introduced sold itself on the claim that 'Access takes the waiting out of wanting'. You could have what you like, when you want it, and never mind the cost. God has never worked like that. Jesus' instruction to the disciples, just before his ascension, was 'Wait!'. Wait until power comes from on high. His departure is going to release into the world a new power, a person of God, bringing the life and power of heaven into all who will receive him in faith and trust. What does God want me to be, to do, to say? It is not necessarily the first thing that comes into my head, but I need to wait for, and test, His guidance.

There is another classic little Christian book called 'The Practice of the Presence of God', written by a French monk three or four hundred years ago. He worked in the kitchen of the monastery where he lived and worshipped, and he describes his life as a quest to be increasingly aware of the presence of God in each moment and activity of his life, even the most mundane. It is a good practice to remember and follow. One of our old hymns encourages us in a similar vein; 'Teach me, my God and king, in all things thee to see'. Let our spiritual ears and eyes be open to hear and see what God is saying and doing in our own day, and our lives be open to receive His power, enabling us to live in His service.