

A Reflection from the Revd Andrew Haines on Luke 24, verses 36-52 - The Ascension

Ascension Day will be celebrated next Thursday (May 21st), but the celebrations will be doubt be very muted indeed. The truth is that Ascension Day hardly causes a ripple of excitement even in the best of years. Maybe it tends to be overlooked because it is something that we find difficult to explain. But then, so is the resurrection, and we are happy to proclaim loudly and clearly that 'Jesus is alive', with the addition of many 'Alleluias'. Maybe it is because Ascension Day is always mid-week, forty days after Easter, and is not a public holiday. Whatever the reason, it goes relatively unnoticed between the great festivals of Easter and Pentecost. I will address this neglect by thinking about different aspects of the Ascension, both this week and next.

Only two of the gospels mention the Ascension. Matthew and John say nothing about it. It is only briefly noted in 'Mark', in the last few verses which many people believe were not written by Mark at all, but were added later. That leaves us with Luke, and his gospel account is equally brief. He does mention it again, though, in what we might call Luke Part 2, otherwise known as the Acts of the Apostles. The gospel ends with the Ascension, Acts begins with it, and it is the unfolding story of what Jesus continued to do in and through the apostles and the early Church.

A quick read through Luke chapter 24 seems to suggest that the Ascension took place on the same day as the resurrection, or the day after. The whole story is very much fore-shortened. We know from Acts, though, that Jesus appeared to his disciples and others for a period of forty days after the resurrection. The gospel seems to see resurrection and ascension as two parts of the same event, and I think that this is the way that Luke wants us to understand these things. The whole process is one event, even though spread over a period of almost six weeks. The fact that Jesus was taken up into heaven puts the seal on the fact that he emerged from the tomb to glorious new life. We will think a bit more about that new life next week.

What happened in the days before and immediately after the Ascension? Beforehand, the disciples were excited and happy in the presence of the risen Jesus, but still confused as to what had happened, and what it all meant. Nothing like it had happened before. Luke tells us that these days were used by Jesus to give the disciples a master-class in Biblical studies. He took them all through the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, the record of God's dealings with His chosen people, and showed them how the whole story is pointing to Himself - his birth, life, death and resurrection. This is an interpretation that traditional Judaism continues to reject. However, and happily, many from that background are indeed finding that it is a true interpretation; that Jesus is their true Messiah. The number of Messianic congregations (Jewish believers in Jesus) has increased rapidly over recent years, and continues to do so. We had the privilege of worshipping with one such congregation in Jerusalem less than three months ago.

If the days before the Ascension were essentially a time of learning for the disciples, the days after were a time of worship and wonder. Their response on top of the Mount of Olives, from where Jesus was taken up, is to immediately give themselves to worship. When they return to their lodgings in the city that worship continues, both at home and in the public arena of the Temple courts day by day. Despite continuing uncertainty about what was going to happen in the days ahead, the embryonic Church continued to give glory to God.

Word and worship. These are at the heart of the ongoing Christian community. We may be muttering to ourselves that 'nothing like this has ever happened before'. Certainly we have had to find some novel ways to continue to be in touch with one another as Church communities, and to engage in worship. Those ways range from extra news-sheets to online video conferencing systems. We can take heart, though, that God is still sovereign, and that His Son, risen and ascended, is glorified at His right hand. May we use this time to become more deeply engrossed in His word, and continue to praise Him: for what He has done for us in Jesus, and also for what is yet to be.