

Ascension Day

Acts 1: 3-14

In speaking and listening, writing and reading, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

On Easter Day we heard Jesus say:

“Do not hold on to me because I have not yet ascended to the Father” as he tells Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.

Forty days later we celebrate the day of that Ascension.

It is good to remember those Easter day words, to remind us that the ascension of Jesus that we celebrate today brings his resurrection to its first fulfilment as he takes our humanity into the eternity of God. Fully human, Jesus has died to take away all that distances humans from God, he has been raised from the dead to overcome the hold of death on humankind and now he carries our human nature into the eternal presence of the Godhead – he goes as the forerunner of each of us, in whom the total fulfilment of the resurrection will be completed as we too follow where he has led.

And the great mystery of the eternal life he opens to us is that, through the Ascension, it begins now. Jesus’ ascension enables his presence with all humanity, through all times and in all places: as truly with us as he was with the disciples as they immediately devoted themselves to prayer.

Today we celebrate the opportunity to know Jesus as a present companion, and to truly know each other as brothers and sisters in him, a sons and daughters of God – our Father and his Father.

Those who were closest to him in his earthly life responded to the ascension by gathering together and devoting themselves to prayer. The writer of Acts gives us a personal picture of that gathering: each of the apostles are mentioned my name, with Mary, Jesus’ mother and the other faithful women. This small

community became the earliest “church” from which an international movement would be born. And the first thing they did together was pray.

That’s a good reminder to us today that the first characteristic of those who are Jesus’ companions, those who are members of his church is that we are a group of people who pray. Our life together has its foundation in our prayer: time spent worshipping God, thanking God, asking of God, resting in God, everything else grows from that.

While we are not able to gather together for public prayer, right now we have a chance to deepen the life we share as a church in our personal prayer, to reset our priorities and make sure is prayer at the centre of how we understand the Christian life we share.

Traditionally, this time from Ascension to Pentecost has been a time to turn, with those in the upper room, to prayer; this tradition has been taken up into the “Thy Kingdom Come” project that spans many countries and denominations now as a time to renew our praying.

Earlier in my time here an Advent group looked a book by Gary Thomas called “Sacred Pathways” which suggests that different people are best inspired to pray in different ways. At the time the group felt this could enrich our common life and the way we invite others to discover their own relationship with God. Over the next days, I am going to send out suggestions for prayer based on the different themes in the book hoping that you might deepen your own prayer life, and that it might inspire ways of people gathering together to pray in new ways in time to come.

As he prepared his friends for the Ascension and Pentecost to come, Jesus told them to “stay in” the city. He called them not to rush into action, but to pause and let God lead the way. For the time being we have had to pause a lot of our action – but these days to come offer us a time to “stay” and give ourselves the time to let God show us the way to come.

In these days to come, may we feel the full joy of the ascension as, like Jesus' friends in the upper room, we devote ourselves to prayer in his eternal presence. Amen.