

You will be my Witnesses

Ascension Day

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Ascension Day is often the poor cousin of our holy days on the church calendar. It occurs during the week, not on Sundays, and has no associated public holiday; it can be easily missed. Unlike Pentecost, where the congregation wear red, it has no authentic traditions associated and is often remembered only in the more Anglo-Catholic and larger churches. As a commemoration that does not seem to stop the nation, it would be easy to overlook, yet the remembered events are essential in shaping what the church should be and how it should act.

Following on from the teaching from last week, where in the upper room Jesus prepared his disciples for his imminent departure, Jesus continued to remain with them and prepare them for what would come. But this was his promise to them, that he would send another comforter and that they should expect even greater things than they had already witnessed. On this day, the crunch finally arrives, and he leaves.

Luke records Jesus' departure in Acts 1, where Jesus is taken into heaven. As he leaves, Jesus promises them two things.

- you **will receive power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and
- you **will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

The first is fulfilled ten days later; we will celebrate this in ten days. Pentecost was the real turning point in the future of the small band of believers. The impact of the Holy Spirit coming into power to these men was profound. They could no longer stay hidden away but burst forth with overwhelming enthusiasm to proclaim the events that had taken place and what they meant. After Jesus had left them, they continued in quiet and hidden fellowship – no doubt focused on prayer.

But the second promise also shows the vision of Jesus for their future. Although called to remain in Jerusalem to start with, the movement was to be limitless. On the morning of the resurrection, Jesus had obtained victory over sin and opened the gate of grace for all humanity. Jesus did not see this

as a secret for them to keep, as all humanity should hear about what had happened and what it would mean to men and women everywhere.

If Jesus had ascended from Mt Rat, I think his words would probably be: you will be my witnesses in the Yorke Peninsula, in South Australia and the rest of our nation, and to the ends of the earth.’ These are not so much instructions as the vision for where the church would go. The reality was that there should be no limits. The reality is that this task still needs to be completed. Two thousand years later, we can see that this has happened. The gospel has been preached throughout the nations, with only a few parts of the world who have not heard this good news. Parts of the world that have listened to the message have subsequently turned their back on the faith – which was once known but is now long forgotten, and evangelism is needed for every generation. So, this promise to the disciples is also one for us as we are surrounded by those who have not heard.

Over the years, you will be aware of the message entrusted to us. (*If not, we can tackle that at another time*). What I think comes from Ascension Day is the missionary vision. In the promise, it is to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. We have preferred to read this as implying that it is only for certain people **called** to take it beyond. Our Gospel takes us to the mountain, and Jesus is recorded as saying *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you*. And we tend to read the sentence as a command to **go**. But it is more subtle. The emphasis in the original language is on “to **make** disciples and **teach**”. The go can also be read as “*as you go*”. And it is as if making disciples and teaching them is the essential activity of the Christian. The mission is not a specific activity but rather a consequence of the presence of those of faith.

Ascension Day is a reminder that Jesus has left it to us and our fellow disciples to continue the expansion of the kingdom. It is not just for the clergy or the special holy people, but for each and every member of the church to carry this fantastic good news to the world. As they collect says: *send us forth to the ends of the earth as heralds of repentance and witnesses of Jesus Christ*.

May we take this seriously as we go through life, changing the world and building the church, one person at a time?

AMEN