**Somervell - Sunday May 28th 2017**

***…”and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth … as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” … Acts 1: 8b & 9b***

The Ascension is celebrated in the life of the Church as both and ‘ending’ and a ‘beginning’. From Acts we might see this as the beginning of the apostolic mission to the world – beginning in Jerusalem and spreading to the four corners of the earth. We might also see this as the end of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth on earth.

Luke offers us a specific time and place for the Ascension – 40 days after the Resurrection and 10 days before Pentecost and on the road between Bethany and Jerusalem - but biblical scholars remain divided on whether this was a specific discreet event or whether the Resurrection and Ascension were concurrent. There is also debate around the location of this event.

This debate has not curtailed the celebration of the Ascension in religious paintings, stained glass windows, in the current church calendar, and as statements in the Creeds of the Church - we have already stated our collective / individual belief in this as we recited the Apostles Creed this morning. Perhaps you glossed over the line which says …”*He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty”. …* Let’s go back to that for a minute.

The Apostles Creed contains ‘statements of belief’ of the Christian community. We rarely use this in our liturgy at Somervell but many churches around the world include standing and reciting this creed most Sundays. So what do these statements mean to us ? Do we own them as ‘statements of belief’ – my belief ? All of them ?

Why do we need such ‘statements of belief’ ? Isn’t it enough just to ‘believe’ ?

Let’s look at a few of the artistic depictions of the Ascension. (there are hundreds available on-line and these few are random selections).

Is this what you were thinking / picturing / imaging when you recited the line in the Apostles Creed ? Or maybe you were still imaging the crucifixion or resurrection ?

*pause to reflect*

Much has been written to ‘explain’ the Ascension and to provide conversation on its significance not just to ‘statements of belief’ but also to the very heart of our Christian faith. We don’t have details of the methodology which somehow makes the ascension in itself a statement of faith. Perhaps the ‘how’ is not the most important consideration here, but the ‘why’.

In today’s reading Luke does suggest some of the ‘hows’: Jesus was ‘lifted up’ – which of course is the dictionary meaning of ascension (v9) ; that the disciples were ‘gazing up toward heaven’ (v10); and that ‘a cloud took Jesus out of their sight (v9)’. These expressions may be more symbolic than mechanical – and we will come back to this alter.

Luke also alludes to something of the ‘why’ with the context he provides. The Book of Acts opens with an emphasis on the promised Holy Spirit – Jesus prior promise that as John baptized with water you (the disciples, us ?) will be baptised with the Holy Spirit (some translations say you will baptise with the Holy Spirit) – Paul’s writings throughout the New Testament suggest that both ‘with’ and ‘by’ form this promise which Jesus made to the disciples. And links it back to Jesus’s comments (to the twelve) that he needs to ‘go’ in order that the Holy Spirit might ‘come’. Luke also offers the words of commission from Jesus (v8) in response to their question about Jesus restoring the kingdom of Israel. It is the disciples who will now continue the ministry of Jesus on earth – through the received power of the Holy Spirit. Luke has ‘two men in white robes’ (v10) – perhaps the same two who terrified the women who went to the tomb to discover Jesus was not there (Luke 24:1-7) and who explained that Jesus had risen – challenge the disciples for ‘looking upward into heaven’ . The disciples were focussing on what ‘had been’ – on Jesus their Teacher now taken from them a second time - rather than on what ‘might be to come’ – on their continuing the ministry of Jesus on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is so much easier to look back to what had been familiar – even if it had been unexpected – than to look ahead into the unknown. And each of us can identify times in our own lives when this has been our course of action / procrastination.

Jesus did leave them. But not alone. He promised them the Holy Spirit (but not for another few days) and he had entrusted to them the work he had begun on earth.

A few weeks ago we read (Acts 7) of Stephen looking towards heaven and seeing Jesus seated at the right hand of God – this same Jesus who these disciples had seen taken from them in a cloud. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the disciples were able to see this picture clearly, they were able to see that although Jesus might have left their presence on earth – bound in time and place – that this same Jesus now returned to his place in heaven (*from which he had come as a helpless babe* – as we sang earlier this morning) which place is ‘seated at the right hand of God’ no longer bound by time and place and fully available to disciples wherever and whenever they might call upon him.

Isn’t this also what we hold to ?

Brian Donne offers this …”*in spite of the mystery which surrounds the Ascension, without it a hiatus exists whereby the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are virtually unrelated to each other. The Ascension is the essential link between the Jesus who walked this earth and the Lord of heaven; the Christ who entered our world of time and space and now reigns in glory in the eternal world; the Saviour who died on Calvary’s Cross and the High Priest who ever lives to make intercession in heaven for his people on earth.”*

I am convinced that when Jesus came to earth – fully human and fully divine – to reconcile the world to its Creator, that this was not a plan B. Further that this plan of God required Jesus – fully human and fully divine – to take upon himself all that maintained this separation between Creator and creation and to ‘once and for all’ dismantle the barrier through crucifixion . Jesus – fully human and fully divine – was raised from death – to prove this was not the ultimate end of creation / humanity; and this same Jesus – fully human and fully divine – returned to the spiritual realm (and to his role) from which he had come to earth.

Let’s not get too worried about ‘where’ heaven might be expect to acknowledge that beyond our constraints of time and space - God is. And where God is, we call heaven. That is the realm of the Creator, the Ruler, The Lord of Lords… (and whatever other words we may choose to describe the infinitely indescribable).

Let’s be more enthused that in this realm of the God-head, Jesus with his experiences of life on earth speaks, discerns, decides, empowers on our behalf. Because Jesus is no longer bound by time and space he is available to all who may call to him wherever they might be and whenever they might need to make such a call. Surely that is worth celebrating !

Coming back to **Acts 1**. Perhaps the ‘cloud’ which came to take up Jesus is the very presence of God experienced by Moses on Mt Sinai, by the Israelites through their Exodus journey, by Jesus at his baptism by John, and now at the Ascension.

Perhaps we next you gaze upon a cloud you might consider how this mighty be a symbol of the presence of God in your life. You might allow your thoughts to go ‘beyond the clouds’ and into the realm of God – Creator, Son, Holy Spirit – and know that in this realm is all the help, comfort, wisdom, justice, compassion we might need for our limited life on this earth. And that with a simple cry of the heart we can access all this through Jesus – fully divine and fully human – who has shown us the way of living life in all its fullness.

We also see a reference here to Jesus coming …*’This Jesus … will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven’.* (v11) This is a reference to the parousia – the second coming of Christ when he comes to earth as Ruler, Judge and Lord. So here Luke connects the incarnation – coming of God to earth in human form – with the ascension – return of Jesus into the heavenly realms as the Son of God – with the parousia – when Jesus comes again to earth to usher in the full reign of God – bringing the Godly realm fully into the realm of the creation.

‘Heaven’ seems to be portrayed in our readings today as positional – ‘up’. I would like to suggest we could adequate translate this as ‘beyond’ which might overcome any difficulty with a positional heaven. Peter Atkins in ‘Ascension Now’ puts it helpfully *…” Whether we speak of heaven as a place of God’s existence or an activity of God in bringing all things to their fulfilment, the essence of the concept is that beyond the limitations of earthly existence there is a heaven where God is and where God’s will is carried out fully.”* … He goes on to add *…”The Ascension of Christ brings humanity into the sphere of heaven, and our destiny is to share the full presence of God and participate in the fulfilment of the purpose for which the universe was created.”*

If we look back to the reading from **John 17** we read of Jesus ‘being glorified’ which John intends as Jesus coming into the presence of God the Creator *..”with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed”.* (v5). Further on in this reading (v11) we have Jesus saying *…”I am no longer in the world”… and …”I am coming to you.”* John has this conversation taking place the evening before his arrest and Jesus is also recorded as saying *…”I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do”* (v4) - and this before the crucifixion and the resurrection.

So John adds two additional aspects to our exploration : That Jesus was conscious of having completed God’s purpose on earth (as fully human and fully divine) and that by completing this purpose he was returning to his rightful place in the realm of the Creator – the place he had occupied since before the world existed / before creation / before time – and resuming the glory which he had laid aside at the incarnation. (Phil 2).

It is into this ‘realm of the Creator’ that we come when we call on the name of Jesus in prayer – when we call upon the ascended Jesus we come into the presence of the God head and all the resources there provided for life to be lived unto its fullest. And available to each of us anytime and everywhere.

As a point of interest, Ascension is not limited to Christianity – actually tomorrow those of the Baha’i faith celebrate the ascension of Baha’ullah, and on April 24th Muslims remembered the ascension of Mohammed to the 7th heaven. Both Mohammed and Baha’ullah returned to continue their life on earth. Jesus ascended and continued God’s purpose for creation in the realm of the Creator (and will eventually return to the earth – when it also becomes the realm of God the Creator.)

In ‘Happenings’ I have attempted to link Graduation ceremonies of the past few weeks with something akin to the ‘beginnings’ and ‘endings’ motif of the Ascension. It is a poor example in many ways but perhaps does raise a question regarding the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ of some of our celebrations and ceremonies. Symbolism is important because life is experienced not only through words and logic. So it is with our experiences of God. It doesn’t need to ‘make sense’ to hold purpose.