Sermon for the Sunday after the Ascension 2020

Thursday was Ascension Day. The last great festival of the Church’s year. The day when we commemorate the ending of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The last act in the incarnational life of God in human form. The day for some when the ‘church’ began as the disciples recognised the ascended Christ and waited for the Holy Spirit to lead them into mission.

It is a self-evident truth that we live in a post-Ascension age. What is not so readily acknowledged is, so did the New Testament writers. They were writing about what happened in the time of the earthly Jesus. But, they were writing to many who had not been witnesses to the events. They were writing from within, and for, Christian communities that were different from one another. So Luke in the gospel, and in Acts, emphasises some things, while John in today’s gospel reading majors on other aspects. Incidentally there is a modern metaphor to show this. It is how the four home countries are coming out of lockdown. The pace and the emphasis in each country is determined by local circumstances.

Luke, in Acts, expands the brief reference to the Ascension in his gospel. In placing the event in both books he is emphasising continuity. It is not just of the two books, but also of the work of Christ in the Gospel and of it continuing in Acts through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In no sense is this the end of the mission. “This Jesus … will come in the same way as you have seen him go.” There is a danger that we place too much emphasis on ‘how it happened’ and ignore ‘why it happened’. It is clear the disciples were trying to explain that which they did not fully understand – so they fell back on biblical images of what happened to Enoch and Elijah. What is more important for us is that this was the completion of the Resurrection. From that time onward Jesus is one with the Father. The earth bound Jesus is liberated to be the Christ in glory. The man for one place and time becomes the saviour of all people in all of time.

John’s Gospel has no account of the Ascension. But for many the final discourses Jesus had with his disciples act in a similar way. In his commentary on John’s Gospel, which was the foundation of the bible study at the 2008 Lambeth Conference, Richard Burridge says of the passage we read this morning:

“We now come to one of the most sublime passages of the New Testament. It was common at the end of a farewell speech to pray and pronounce a blessing over the listeners… So now, after his final discourses Jesus prays to his Father. This chapter reveals years of prayer and reflection by the evangelist under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” At its heart are three simple petitions all addressed by Jesus to God his Father:

*Father, glorify your Son*

*Father, protect them in your name*

*Father, may they be one with me*

The first two appear in the passage we read this morning, the third comes later in the chapter.

In the passage Jesus prays to the Father that he has “finished the work on earth you gave me to do.” On earth he has been about his Father’s business, doing the work of the Father, bringing in the kingdom of God. Now all is complete, now it is time to return to the glory he had in God’s presence “before the world existed.” Jesus goes on to pray for the disciples, those that the Father gave him. While he was with them he has protected them. Now the Father, through the Holy Spirit will protect them – “all mine are yours, and yours are mine” – Jesus prays that God will “keep them in your name”. Keep in this context means to ‘protect’, or more literally, ‘watch over’ like a loving parent seeing their children about to launch into the world. They have to let them go, but they are concerned about them. He prays that they are one as he and the Father are one and anticipates his final prayer for the unity of all his disciples.

During this period of enforced inactivity, or prescribed activity, I have taken the chance to read books on the shelves which have been unread for ages. Those books I had always meant to get round to but never did. I have just finished *“Wounded Prophet”*, Michael Ford’s portrait of Henri Nouwen, the great Dutch spiritual writer and guide. The final chapter ends with a quotation from Nouwen’s final book *“The Inner Voice of Love”*, which was published just after his death:

‘In Jesus, God took on human flesh. The Spirit of God overshadowed Mary, and in her all enmity between spirit and body was overcome. Thus God’s spirit was united with the human spirit, and the human body became the temple destined to be lifted up into the intimacy of God through the Resurrection. Every human body has been given a new hope, of belonging eternally to the God who created it. Thanks to the Incarnation, you can bring your body home.’

Those words written before his death but not published until after it, were in their way, prophetic. Henri Nouwen had two funerals; one at his home in his native Holland; the other in Ontario, Canada, where he had spent the last decade of his life as a chaplain to a L’Arche community. L’Arche communities across the world enabled wounded and disabled people to find safety, meaning and fulfilment. In Dayspring in Canada he found a home which was more fulfilling than his time in academia and in preaching. In Dayspring his first job was as carer for a young man, Alan, who had severe learning difficulties and had no verbal communication. All was gestures and expressions. Henri Nouwen found he learnt more from that young man who couldn’t speak than he had from learned people.

It was that encounter which enabled him to sum up the glory and the focus of his faith. It is a short passage for every Christian to hold dear at this Ascensiontide. It is also a message for our time. Even in the difficult time of coming out of lockdown, with the fear that induces. Even in the darker days when the death toll climbs even more. We can affirm with Nouwen, “Every human body has been given a new hope, of belonging to the God who created it.” Let’s pray for that every day – and where we can, share that hope with others.