



Seventh Sunday Ascension 2006

Acts 1:1-11 Ephesians 4: 1-13 Mark 16: 15-20

The story of the Ascension is a wonderful reflection on some of the aspects of resurrection. The stories that are recorded as occurring post-resurrection are there to help us understand how the community understood the continuing mission of Jesus. We know of course that all our gospels are written in the light of the resurrection and are therefore manuals to teach us the way of discipleship but the story of the Ascension is more to do with how we now relate to Christ risen.

The evangelists chose different ways to conclude their testimony. The Gospel of John ends with the witness of the writer to the truth of his account of the words and deeds of Jesus. Matthew ends with the commission to create discipleship. Mark's Gospel has three endings penned by different authors at different times. In one addition, verse 16:19 there is a reference to the return to God by Jesus. The changes to Mark's Gospel show that the community was engaged in a continuing process of learning more about the Jesus they followed.

Luke is the only writer to develop a link between the earthly Jesus and Christ risen. He does this both in his Gospel and in Acts. In his beautiful story he calls on biblical images to help express his message.

The story of Acts, is the story of the body we call church. Luke is writing about continuity and discontinuity, the role of Jesus and his mission and the continuing mission of the Spirit. The Gospel is an account of the sequence of events that reach a peak in the death/resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel, in a sense, doesn't have an ending because it suggests that there is more to follow.

"Remain here in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Luke 24:49

In Acts before he describes the *clothing in power*, Pentecost, he reminds the hearers of Jesus passing into glory.

We speak sometimes of Jesus founding the church and we assume that Jesus passed on a description of this organisation with clear directions and lines of authority. While it is right to regard the church as having Christ as its centre it is easy to overlook the very important role of the Spirit. Through the structure of Luke/Acts, the author seems to be helping us gain a proper understanding of the relationship that should exist between the Spirit and the Word.

A famous theologian, Yves Congar, calls the Spirit the *Co-instituting Principle* and the constant *Animating Principle* of the church. Another theologian says that the role of the Spirit is to liberate the Word and us from the bondage of history. We often say that the Spirit animates the Church as if the church existed independently of the Spirit. Without the Spirit there is no church.

The two-fold mission of Spirit and Word is an expression of the fruitfulness of God. By remembering these aspects we keep before us the call to be communion and the call to mission.

The reading from Ephesians focuses on communion. "Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force." The church from the beginning was a church of churches, a communion of groups of those who followed the new way. These groups had a common heart but the expression of their faith was coloured by ethnic diversity.

Unity is not uniformity, for this would run counter to the action of the Spirit who is not bound by human limitations. The Church will ever be expressed through a variety of gifts. Paul reminds us that we are recipients of these gifts. These gifts enable us to continue to contribute to the building up the one universal body through our building up of the local church.

Differences show forth the wonder of the fruitfulness of the Spirit so we need to celebrate of different expressions of church and not seek to bind the Spirit.

By celebrating the ascension we are recognising that we cannot cling to the historical Jesus, but we must step forward into the new age proclaimed by Jesus but handed over to the Spirit so that we continue the work of gathering all peoples into the embrace of God, so that the communion of Trinity is visible in the communion of all peoples and all creation.

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