

Ascension Sunday – participating in God’s mission

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Mark 16:15-20

Today is the beginning of our Global Mission Month. Appropriately enough, it is also Ascension Sunday – the day in which we remember the post-resurrection Jesus commissioning his disciples for mission before being “taken up” from them.

In past years I have spoken of the ascension in regard to how we can read passages like these as credible historical text. This Ascension Sunday, however, I want to just touch on the meaning of the ascension in relation to our thinking about *our* place in God’s *on-going* mission of redemption, reconciliation and making things new.

All of the first three Gospels make this connection between Jesus’ commissioning his followers to continue his mission within the “creation” (as the Gospel refers to *our* world), and his departure from it.¹

The tendency is, I think, (especially, for a number of reasons, in Protestant thinking²), to see this as something that God has done in the past. Certainly if you Google ‘Jesus ascension’, these are the images you get...



¹ Mark 16:15.

² Part of our reformed obsession with preserving the integrity of Christ finished work on the cross.

Apart from their bizarre nature of these images (bizarre to *us* anyway, as we perhaps struggle to connect to the cultural expressions of our forebears), the sense that this is “long ago” is everywhere evident.



The question then becomes, of course, where is Jesus *now* and what is he *doing*?

According to Ephesians and the Gospel of Mark, from which we have heard today, he is “seated at the right hand of God”. Continuing the metaphor, in Ephesians we read God “has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”³

Again, this highly symbolic language around Jesus’ ascension tends to conjure images of some sort *static* existence. We imagine Jesus as a bit like an indolent young Lord, literally just hanging around being “Lordly”. Again, just look at a couple of the very representative images taken off the web. Not much is going on.

...

Yet the New Testament throughout, is emphatic that this is not so. Jesus’ ascension, his “lifting up” into some other order of life, is not presented as a transformation into a static mode of existence that (as some have

³ Ephesians 1:22-23.

suggested⁴), functions more to explain the absence of Jesus' body than to describe with any credibility what he is doing now.

Rather, according to both the book of Hebrews and Paul's letter to the Romans, for instance, Jesus continues his mission even in his present absence. In both these books, Jesus is said to be *interceding*, in concert with his *Spirit*, on behalf of those who wait with longing for his return.

In Romans we read:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the *Spirit*, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as God's children, [that is] the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the *Spirit helps us* in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, *but the Spirit himself intercedes* for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

...What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? [Rather], Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was *raised to life* – is at the right hand of God and is also *interceding* for us.

So, the coming of Jesus into his creation, his life and death, his resurrection and ascension, the sending of his Spirit, are all seen in continuity as aspects on the one on-going mission of God – a mission to redeem and reconcile, and make new his creation.

⁴ This is Prof. Lloyd Geering's argument which he presented on National Radio, Ascension Sunday 2007.

In other words, Jesus continues to be active in his life *in* God, and *in* his creation.

So when, at his departure, Jesus says “Go into all the world and *proclaim* the good news to the whole creation”⁵ – that is “Go and do what I have done”⁶ – he is also saying, “go and do what I am *continuing* to do”. Indeed, just a few verses later Mark actually writes this when he recounts:

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and *proclaimed* the good news everywhere, while the Lord *worked with them*.^{7,8}

...

This idea of Jesus’ working *with us* when we go in his name, to “*proclaim the good news*”, is very important – it is not just as a theological nicety.

I say this because there is within the western wing of the Anglican church (and many other churches for that matter), a reluctance to own the task Jesus has given us to *proclaim* the Gospel – that is, to teach and preach and baptise or, in Matthew’s version of this commission, to “make disciples of all nations”.

I can’t help thinking that at least some of this lack of confidence is to do with a misunderstanding of what mission is; an understanding that sees proclamation of the Gospel as something *we* do rather than something that *God* does *with us*.

The Gospel summons us to cooperate, to enter into *partnership* with God. Yet in the end, this partnership recognises that mission, in all its aspects, is God’s mission from start to finish. It is God who *initiates* it in Christ and *empowers* it in Christ in an *on-going* way. We are simply called to participate.

⁵ Mark 16:15.

⁶ See especially John 20:21.

⁷ Mark 16:19-20.

⁸ See also Matthew 28:19-20.

As Jesus intercedes for us, as the Spirit works within us to sustain us in our hope, so we become empowered in our mission to represent Christ to others.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians:

So then, we are ambassadors for Christ, since *God* is making his appeal *through* us.⁹

...

When we grasp this, when we grasp that Jesus goes before us and with us (and after us), then we can gain great strength in our witness.

As we read before, God desires that many will come from all the nations into that wonderful relationship with him called “the glorious liberty of the children of God”.

Jesus is *already active* in achieving this. In the great sweep of history, he *will* prevail. The creation and all within it *will* be reconciled to himself. *Our* calling is to become part of this.

If you’re looking for an image of the Ascension – how about this one.¹⁰



⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

¹⁰ Last image: Rosie Fyfe – CMS, St. Mic’s and Diocese of Egypt mission partner.