

ASCENSION DAY – 2021

Acts 1:1-11
Eph 4:1-7;11-13
Mk 16:15-20

Endings and beginnings are often two sides of the same coin and the story of Jesus' life is full of them. The birth, death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit are endings and beginnings. The story of the ascension of Jesus is more than a rounding off of the life of Jesus on earth and his return to his pre-incarnate state. The ascension confers on Jesus the supreme lordship over the whole universe which in the Old Testament had been considered as belonging to God alone.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles still expected a political solution and the restoration of power to Israel. Jesus told them that they would receive power which would enable them to be witnesses to Christ and his resurrection, a ministry that would begin in Jerusalem and spread like concentric circles throughout the world. St Luke considers the ascension to be the one condition that makes the gift of the Holy Spirit possible as he sends them out to exercise their various ministries.

The ending of St Mark's gospel, which was written later than the gospel, asserts that the apostolic ministry was a universal one – it was to the whole of creation. Believing is an important requirement for salvation and the signs of that belief will be the ability to drive out evil, to heal the sick and speak in different languages. All these gifts are found being exercised elsewhere in Scripture with the exception of being unharmed by poisonous liquids – that belongs in the world of dictators, spies and the film industry!

The apostles' obedience to their mission in Mark's gospel is very like the account of St Luke in his gospel and the Acts. In Luke's account the disciples return to Jerusalem with great joy following the ascension. This seems odd considering that Jesus had left them for the last time, so what might be the explanation of this joy? They understood that Jesus would no longer be in one particular place in the world but had promised to be available, approachable and accessible to all no matter what situation they were in. Although Jesus would be no longer visible, he would be closer to them than he had ever been. He would always be with his Church and this should be the reason for our joy on this festival. It is easy for us to become despondent when times are tough and we are only despondent because we think we are on our own. The ascension assures us otherwise. We are not alone.

As TS Eliot reminds us, "to make an ending is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." For each of us and for the Church universal, today must be another beginning.

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