

Ascension Day Sermon Thursday 10th May 2018
Daniel 7:9-14 Acts 1:1-11 Luke 24:44-53

It was Julian of Norwich who wrote those inspired words that 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

They are words that are particularly poignant tonight because they sum up the transformation in the followers of Jesus that we celebrate on Ascension Day, for on this day strange, as it may seem we celebrate Christ's leaving his disciples.

But his leaving them is not a sombre occasion. It is full of joy and hope and reminds us how their lives had changed, of how they had come to trust in God's ultimate purpose for them and believe that all will indeed be well because Christ will always be with them.

Ascension Day can seem to have been pushed to the fringes of the churches year. Maybe we find Ascension difficult because of the images that we associate with it; of Jesus stepping onto a fluffy white cloud and waving to his disciples on some kind of divine escalator, not helpful.

I am not going to dwell on the mechanics of the Ascension, the how, but rather to focus on its effect.

For this is a great day that marks the beginning of the final days of Easter

A week on Sunday we shall be celebrating Pentecost when the fire of the spirit is breathed into the hearts and minds of the disciples.

Tonight we celebrate the journey the disciples have made thus far and what a journey it had been.

From Thomas reaching into the wounds of Christ, to the fisherman by the Lake unable to haul their catch of fish, from his appearance on the Road to Emmaus to the great commission to his disciples "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."

By the Ascension they had come to understand that the Resurrection was not just as a physical reality, as indeed it was, but an ongoing spiritual experience as well. The tomb was empty. Jesus had been raised to life, and their spiritual journey was not over but was ongoing.

In other words when Jesus was physically alive and walking the earth his ministry was limited in the same way our lives are limited, we can only be in one place at a time.

Yet after the Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost, Jesus' ministry was limitless.

But, quite understandably, it took the disciples a while to understand this.

As we look back today on these days of celebration since Easter, yes - celebration rather than Lenten fasting, as we look back it's easy for us to forget how difficult those days, after there resurrection, must have been!

What a mix of emotions the followers of Jesus must have felt yet Jesus wasn't content to simply comfort them with his presence. He challenged them, he opened their minds to the new thing he was doing.

Remember the story of Mary Magdalene on the first Easter morning...Mary Magdalene speaks to the Risen Lord and almost his first words to her are "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.""

These must have been harsh words for her to hear. Most of us know how traumatic it can feel when you think you have lost someone, think for example when someone you love says they will be back by a certain time and they're not, you cannot help but worry and in our minds run through all kinds of horrific scenarios.

So that when we see our loved one again we long to touch them, to give them a hug, to hold them.

So imagine Mary's sense of elation when she sees Jesus, yet he says to her 'Do not hold onto me'.

Likewise though the disciples touched Jesus' wounds, his hands and his feet, he doesn't want them to dwell too long on his physical transformation for whilst the resurrection appearances are proof of God's power, the day of resurrection was not an end but just a beginning.

A beginning not defined by fear but filled with hope and joy, a hope and joy that spilled over into proclamation.

In our Gospel reading this evening, Jesus leaves his disciples; they will never see him again. But listen again to a few words from the end of the Gospel

"While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Luke 24"51-52

They 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy.'

These were no longer men and women held prisoner by their fear. The transformation that Jesus wanted was in their hearts and minds so that now they were willing to go and serve the Lord, no matter what the cost.

They had an unshakeable conviction in God's sovereign power over all the earth. They knew that whatever fate befell them as individuals; ultimately all would always be well.

So let us rejoice this Ascension Day as we remember the transforming journey that the disciples had undertaken in the days after the resurrection.

We too are caught up in the resurrection life, we believe that despite all the trials and pains of this life, that all will be well, that Christ does sit at the right hand of God, guiding his Church and us his people, leading us through his spirit as he promises into 'all truth'

Let us commit ourselves this night to live as people not limited by our fears but a people transformed by Our Christ who is risen, ascended and glorified.