

May 5th, 2016

Ascension Day

Sermon 125

St George's

### ***The Inconvenience of Faith***

Texts: Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

*For the love of God in Scripture  
For the love of God among us  
For the love of God within us  
Thanks be to God*

As a child I have very distinct memories of my mother informing me and my three sisters in the morning of whichever particular day that day was, and I don't just mean "Today is Monday" for instance. We knew when it was a major saint's day, which member of the Royal Family was having a birthday, and also the principal religious festivals, Ascension Day being one of them. In those days, when everything was black and white, we also had a proper Whitsun Bank Holiday, with half term attached (and that wasn't a whole week off then either).

As with other things, holy days are now far less high profile, Whitsun (or Pentecost) has been secularised and is now the Spring Bank Holiday at the end of May, which always seems a little late to me. There is also now a real possibility that by 2020 Easter will be similarly set to a fixed Sunday later in April (the third Sunday after the third Saturday - which will only become relevant if April 1st is a Sunday I think). And that is very much later than Easter was this year, and that would mean a very much earlier Easter Vigil if we continue to celebrate Jesus rising from the dead immediately before sunrise, there being a

44 minute difference between sun rise on this year's Easter Sunday and the third Sunday of April this year, the **convenient** day for a secularised Easter.

But let me ask this: what is there that is **convenient** about faith in Jesus?

Around here some people may think that it is **convenient** to become a churchgoer in order to get their child into Ranelagh, but if they knew how many years they might have to attend church before standing a good chance of getting their child in, they might well think again. Faith is **not** a matter of convenience!

An interesting page on the internet asks "When are we going to do away with the holy days of obligation?" Going on to add "We no longer live in medieval times when a whole village closed down for the day. The only people at mass now are the true diehards. Please encourage the Bishops to put the celebrations on Sunday or take away the obligation." That came from the Reverend Kenneth Doyle on December 22nd, 2014, in the Catholic News Service, New York; perhaps he'd like to have Christmas Day on a Sunday too....

So, as the Reverend Kenneth Doyle suggests, *we are all diehards*. So congratulate yourselves. You've all done very well!

But as I asked earlier: What is there that is **convenient** about faith in Jesus?

I wonder what those who stood on the mountain top staring up into the sky thought about the **convenience**, or not, of their faith?

Three years ago they had given up their lives, their careers, and their families, to follow Jesus, based solely on his statement “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Can any of us actually imagine having *that* degree of faith, that we would leave everything, in the way that the disciples did. Although Jesus had that indefinable something about him, none of the 12 really had any idea of what a difference following him would make to them, and yet they were prepared to take that step. By contrast, our faith may shape the way we live our lives, and behave, but has it actually tipped it on it’s head and changed absolutely everything. Perhaps only Catherine and Dennis amongst us can really claim that.

For the last three years the disciples have been apprentices for Christ, learning on the job, and completing assignments with varying degrees of success. Well now, the end of their apprenticeship is in sight. Ascension day is just one more stage on the way towards their award ceremony on the Day of Pentecost. Ordinarily the successful completion of an apprenticeship would set a boy or man up for life, providing security, a job (or at least, a skill) for life, and the apprentice would have felt a growing confidence as their ‘time’ drew to a close, but for these apprentice apostles, the last few weeks of their ‘time’ was fraught with upset, uncertainty and more than a bit of confusion. Hopefully, at the time that Jesus ascended to his Father, and as they descended the mountain they were beginning to feel a measure of confidence return.

On that mountain two promises have been made:

That they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and

That Jesus will return in the same way that he departed.

But again I wonder, did these promises help or just add further confusion?

We often refer to the events of Holy Week as being a journey, taking us from Jesus’ triumphant arrival in Jerusalem, through the Last Supper, his trial and crucifixion, and on to his resurrection. But the journey does not end there. In the intervening weeks, Jesus has appeared to the disciples and others many times, completing those outstanding tasks, confirming in Peter his role in the founding of the new Church, and commissioning the disciples generally, as he has commissioned each one of us. And having completed those tasks, the journey continues - Jesus *has* to leave, to ascend to his Father (as he told Mary when she met him at the tomb). If Jesus had not ascended to his Father the Holy Spirit would not have been released. And that was crucial to the empowering of the Apostles in their task to “make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that he had [commanded them].” That task was probably greater than the Apostles could possibly imagine. As Luke records in his introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, they wanted to know if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom to Israel? But instead of answering directly (as they may have wished) Jesus, as he always had, didn’t give a simple answer. After all, his idea of Israel was not a geographically limited area of land. Jesus’ idea of Israel began with Jerusalem, continued to Judea and Samaria, and extended to the ends of the earth. There is some crucial understanding to be gleaned there; Jesus made it *very* clear - he, and his Father, have no limits. His ministry was not to a group of people, or to a town, a region, or a

country, but to the very ends of the earth, without limit - all were, and are, welcome in his kingdom.

The journey was not over yet; Jesus had already told his Apostles to remain in Jerusalem and await the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The truth of his statement that they were to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth would be confirmed in events on Pentecost.

So should we be here celebrating Jesus' ascension on a **inconvenient** Thursday evening? Yes, of course we should! We should never feel that our faith has to be scheduled in a **convenient** way. Frankly if we wanted our faith to be convenient it would not be challenging, or spontaneous, or demanding, **or** rewarding.

So ready to be inconvenienced, to respond in a second, to be inspired in unexpected places, and to serve our Lord in every possible way!

Amen.