

LANGBANK CHURCH  
Sunday 24 May 2020  
Service for Ascension Sunday



Christ of St John on the Cross by Salvador Dali

Our Lord has returned to his throne in heaven.  
He is seen no more on earth.  
Yet he lives, and is with us now, and for all eternity.

Christ triumphant, ever reigning,  
Saviour, Master, King!  
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,  
hear us as we sing:

*Yours the glory and he crown,  
the high renown, the eternal name!*

Word incarnate, truth revealing,  
Son of Man on earth!  
Power and majesty concealing  
by your humble birth:

Suffering servant, scorned, illtreated,  
victim crucified!  
Death is through the cross defeated,  
sinners justified:

Priestly king, enthroned for ever  
high in heaven above!  
Sin and death and hell shall never  
stifle hymns of love:

So, our hearts and voices raising  
through the ages long,  
ceaselessly upon you gazing,  
this shall be our song.

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
We greet you today as King of Kings and Lord of Lords!  
We commit ourselves to your kingdom.

Open our eyes, then, to the meaning of your Ascension.  
Broaden our vision, enlarge our understanding,  
widen our perspectives, and deepen our faith.  
Help us to see the world as you do....  
So many species and races and landscapes  
yet all part of your created world,  
and you see, and know, and love them all.

Lord, from your heavenly throne you see us  
fair or dark, or old or young  
of different tongues and different creeds,  
all made in God's image,  
under one Majestic sky.....

You feel our joy, and share our hope.  
You see the cruelty, hear the pain of all mankind,  
and care for every one of us,

Loving Shepherd of all with world.  
Forgive us when we stray.  
Forgive us when we fail to trust that you will bring us home.  
Forgive us when we use our assets to divide  
so that we come out on top.

Help us to learn from our mistakes,  
that this is not the way.  
Help us come to see  
the stranger as our neighbour  
and love our neighbour as ourselves  
that your Kingdom might come on earth,  
some day,  
as it is in heaven. *Amen*

## READING Acts 1: 1-14

### **Jesus taken up into heaven**

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: *'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'*

Then they gathered round him and asked him,  
*'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'*

He said to them: *'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'*

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. *'Men of Galilee,'* they said, *'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'*

### **Matthias chosen to replace Judas**

Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

### **REFLECTION**

Ascension Sunday is less celebrated in our branch of the Church as in others, which is perhaps a pity, as it is the last piece in the narrative of Jesus' time on earth. *'He came from heaven, helpless babe'*, as the hymn says – and he healed the sick and preached about God's Kingdom, and was crucified, and died and rose again – and at Ascension the cycle is completed by Jesus' returning to heaven in glory, to take his seat at God's right hand. This has been the stated belief of the Church since the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

In fact, Matthew and John do not describe the Ascension at all – but, rather recount how Jesus takes leave of the disciples in Galilee. It is in Mark and Luke's Gospels that Jesus comes to the eleven in Jerusalem and is then taken up into heaven, his own mission on earth now completed. And it is Luke alone who

bridges the gap between The Age of Jesus and The Age of the Church, in the opening chapter of his sequel, the Book of Acts, as we read this morning.

And yet, this Book will continue to be all about Jesus - the risen and ascended Christ - and the effect he will continue to have on his disciples, through the Holy Spirit. And that is why Luke reminds them here of the time after his death when Jesus appeared among them and ate and spoke with them. The disciples are going to be the actors in a Great Adventure, but Jesus is still the Star.... And, of course, we are still in The Age of the Church, Jesus is still the Star, but is we who are now the actors in the Great Adventure. Different time, different place, but the same commission....

The disciple are to be witnesses to the resurrection. We are still witnesses to the resurrection - not because we witnessed it with our own eyes, but because we join the millions since, who *'believe without seeing'*. Belief in the resurrection is an inner statement of faith, based on our 'knowing' that Jesus lives, because we have experienced the effect he has on our lives and the lives of others. It might also be called the Holy Spirit within us..... and as the story of The Age of the Church gets underway, we will learn how the disciples discovered that the Gifts of the Spirit were the building blocks of God's Kingdom. They still are.

Still, when you think of all the things you might want to say to a friend before he goes, it seems odd that their burning question is: *"Lord, are you at this time going to restore Israel"*. The disciples now believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and years of Jewish teaching has taught them to expect that the Messiah would look after his own and, first-off, re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. With God in charge of Israel, *their* land would become the epicentre of the world!

Jesus sidesteps. This is an extension of ME-FIRST thinking and it goes with being human. Tribalism is just a few steps up the road from self-preservation. At a basic level, they keep us alive – but they also hedge us in.... and it is this form of egoism that Jesus attacks again and again and again. It challenges every one of us day after day and ruins our chances of living fairly, generation after generation.

A month or so ago we were coming to terms with the fact China, The United States and Europe were facing a devastating foe, in the form of Coronavirus. We

were alarmed at the shortage of PPE for our front line workers and devastated to hear one lunchtime that a consignment addressed to Scotland had ended up in England. What was less well known was that a whole planeload of protective clothing bound for France (who were suffering greatly at that stage) was hi-jacked on the tarmac by American agents. Both stories were quickly stifled in order to protect international relations but it was a good example of tribalism emerging even as we fought alongside one another. Jesus' response to the disciples' question makes it clear that they are to forget Israel – that time is past – and look forward to working on a larger canvas..... Jerusalem, the city they are in; Judea, the surrounding countryside; Samaria, the near neighbours whom Israel has hated for years; and on to the rest of the world, the world of foreigners.....

We should be thankful that, today, Scientists and Doctors do work across borders, sharing knowledge for the good of all – and thereby increasing the hope is that a vaccine will be found. According to the official from the WHO, speaking last Sunday evening, it will be vital that the richer countries, who are more likely to develop a vaccine, do not keep it to themselves – but share with the Third World. If this does not happen, she said, then the world will never be free of it, as the numbers there are so great.

Being a witness for Jesus means standing up for the values he taught us, in our own time and place. And that means dealing with our selfish gene inside all of us, which puts ME-first - until the time comes when we love others as ourselves, even those we don't know. The chances are miniscule – as slim as Isaiah's vision of the lion laying down with the lamb - as slim as the chances of five loaves and two fishes feeding a multitude, on a lonely hillside.....

We are called as witnesses, and we do not journey alone. We have Jesus' teaching, and each other, and a Helper infinitely more powerful. The eleven were to stay safely in Jerusalem until they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that made all the difference! We'll read next week how, on the day we celebrate as Pentecost, eleven bewildered men were changed, and how they set about changing the world around them, one step at a time.

## PRAYER

Jesus said, *'Ask in my name and I will do it'*

and so we offer our prayers in His Name,

for people and places in all parts of the world,

We pray that you would bring peace to our world.

We pray that you would bring justice to our world.

We pray that you would eradicate poverty in our world.

We pray that you would heal the sick in our world.

Lord,

We know these things will not happen without us

so let us not forget them,

because we worry about us.

May your Spirit keep us from the narrow focus

that sees only ourselves and our troubles.

We pray for your Church worldwide,

that it might witness to you in Spirit and in Truth

and be a light in this time of universal fear.

We pray for the Church of Scotland

at the end of a 'virtual' Assembly week.

and for our new Moderator, Martin Fair,

as he begins a strange time in office.

We pray for our Church here at Langbank

that we may continue to witness to Christ

outside the walls of our buildings –

the same witness in a different way

for different times.

And we pray that we will be guided at all times

by your Holy Spirit, in our midst.

Lord,

We pray for any whose lives are moving to a close just now  
for those who faithfully wait at bedsides,  
and for all who grieve alone.

And, in these harsh times, we pray for everyone  
whose Lives are empty, or confused, or full of care.

We pray for any among our families, friends or neighbours  
who have been bereaved this week  
thinking especially of Fiona Guthrie and family  
after Gordon's death this week....

And we ask your blessing now on those  
we love the most and cannot meet just now .....

*pause*

Lord Jesus,

You have promised to answer our prayers.

Give US the grace to answer the prayers of others,  
when you call us to do your will. *Amen*

## HYMN

He is Lord, he is Lord;  
he is risen from the dead and he is Lord;  
every knee shall bow, every tongue confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is love, he is love;  
he has shown us by his cross that he is love;  
all his people sing with one voice of joy  
that Jesus Christ is love.

He is life, he is life;  
He has died to set us free and he is life;  
and he calls us all to live for evermore,  
for Jesus Christ is life.

He is King, he is King;  
he will draw all nations to him, he is King;  
and the time shall be when the world shall sing  
that Jesus Christ is King.

## **BLESSING**

May the King of Kings  
reign in your heart and mind forever  
and the blessing of God Almighty  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
be with you and all whom you love,  
now and evermore. *Amen*