

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church

The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Sunday 24th May 2020 – “Ascension Sunday”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this Podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

I wonder how you are coping in these days of lockdown. For many weeks now we've been living with the daily restrictions placed on our lives because of the virus that we know as Covid 19. It's presence and reality has stopped not just our own communities, but also the whole world in it's tracks and we are each having to find ways to fill our days so that we do not allow one day to simply merge into another.

As I speak to people each week on the phone – and also more recently on Zoom meetings – it's been interesting to hear how folk are occupying their time... Some I know are making face masks from bits of material around their house... others have painted that garden fence... and some have emptied out their loft... whilst in many gardens the flower beds have never looked as neat!

We've been using this time – of an evening when the TV hasn't been so good - to catch up on some James Bond films. We've watched all the Sean Connery, Roger Moore and Timothy Dalton films (Oops - did I forget to mention the one film where Bond was played by George Lazenby?!) ... Now, this may come as a surprise to some folk around Chalmers Church who heard me speak often about films that involve Iron Man, Superman and Wonder Woman! If this goes on any longer, mind you, I will get to them too – eventually!

Finding something to pass the time in those spare moments has been a big part of what has helped each of us through these days... finding a daily purpose... an aim – even a small target to reach.

Today is Ascension Sunday which, as we will be thinking about shortly, is the day when we remember Jesus going to be with his heavenly Father. As we come to the story, however, we meet with a group of disciples who seemingly have a bit more time on their hands than they usually did and who aren't totally sure of their purpose as they wait for that day when they will be sent out into the world to serve Jesus.

But we'll come to that in a moment... First of all, shall we pray? **Let us pray.**

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord God, we come today reminded of your greatness and glory, your sovereign power and eternal purpose all expressed so wonderfully in Jesus Christ, our Lord: Risen and Ascended.

We thank you for the wonder of the Ascension, that marvellous yet mysterious moment in the life of the Apostles which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion yet departing in joy.

We thank you for the way that it brought the earthly ministry of Jesus to a fitting conclusion, signifying his oneness with you, and demonstrating your final seal of approval on all that he had done.

We thank you that through his Ascension Jesus is now set free to be Lord of all: no longer bound to a particular place or time, but with us always - able to reach even to the ends of the earth.

We thank you that through his departing Jesus prepared for his coming again: through his Spirit, his Church, and his coming again in glory.

Gracious God forgive us for so often failing to grasp the wonder of the Ascension, for living each day as though it had never been.

Forgive the smallness of our vision, the narrowness of our outlook, the weakness of our love, the nervousness of our witness, our repeated failure to recognize the fullness of your revelation in Christ.

Give us a deeper sense of wonder, a stronger faith, and a greater understanding of all you have done

Father God, like the Apostles, we too will never fully understand all that the Ascension means.

We accept, but we do not fully understand. We believe, yet we have many questions.

Help us, despite our uncertainty, to hold firm to the great truth that the wonder of Christ Jesus goes far beyond anything we can ever imagine, and in that faith may we live each day to his glory and honour.

Hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in the words that Jesus taught us to say.

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – Acts chapter 1 verses 1 to 12

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 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. 4 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. 5 For John baptised with water, but in a few days, you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’

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

7 He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 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.'

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

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 '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.'

12 Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Today is Ascension Sunday – the day in the Christian Calendar when we mark the moment when Jesus left his earthly home so that he might go to be with his Heavenly Father. And immediately we say that, we are hit by a series of challenges and questions.

You see, the Jesus we have got used to finding out about in the gospels is very much an earthly centred one. Ok, so now and again Jesus talks about the things of heaven but, in the main, the Jesus we find in the Bible lives and breathes in the world of tangible things.

So, in the gospels, we find Jesus healing blind beggars and making the lame walk... He feeds multitudes on a hillside... teaches to large groups and small groups... He deals with pharisees and tax collectors... before facing the all too earthly reality of the cross itself.

This all means, in effect, that the Jesus we discover in the gospels is a very human Saviour. He is one with us, even if we know that God dwells within him. Even although we call him divine, he still sits at the same dinner table as his friends.

So, when we come to talk of Jesus ascending into heaven to be with his heavenly Father, we find ourselves on less certain ground.

There's perhaps only one incident in the gospels that is even vaguely similar to the one recounted in our reading from Acts chapter 1 – and that is the story of Jesus' transfiguration, that day when on a mountaintop Jesus, accompanied by some of his closest disciples, is transformed with the glory of God and even seems to be speaking with the great prophets of old. On the mountaintop heaven and earth somehow speak to each other in a unique way.

But, then again, as Jesus descends the mountain with his friends, doesn't he tell them to say nothing about what they had just seen to anyone else? It's as if he doesn't want that picture of him – shining in glory – to be the one that dominates their mind. Rather, he wants them to see the simplicity of his life and the sense of commitment that he shows to others.

It's not that glory and service are incompatible. It is possible to be glorious and humble at the same time. It's just that, as we find it in the gospels, Jesus wanted his glory to be seen as emerging from his serving of others. It is through his servant's status that we come to see the divine in him.

However, Luke, the gospel writer - who also happened to pen the words of the book of Acts from which our reading today is taken - is keen here to move the story of Jesus along. Or, as William

Barclay puts it to move the story along from being about Jesus alone so that he can start telling the story of the emerging Church which tries to follow him.

And for the Church to emerge the Holy Spirit has to be given to the believers and Jesus himself said, at John chapter 15 and verse 26, that he would send the Holy Spirit – *“the Spirit of truth (as Jesus puts it) who goes out from the Father and who will testify to (him)”*... and that will only happen once Jesus has gone to be with the Father himself.

Somehow, as we see here, Luke is trying to bring the two elements of the life of Jesus, on the one hand, and the future life of the Church, on the other, together.

That’s why, as our reading opens, Luke spends the time he does in reminding his readers about all the things that he had described in his former book – what we know as the Gospel of Luke. He focusses on the things that Jesus taught his followers, the way he suffered and died for them as well as the way he appeared to them after he rose from the dead.

He also highlights that Jesus had never promised that, once he had risen from the dead, that everything would simply return to the “normality” that they had experienced before.

The rising of Jesus from the dead was not about getting things back to the way things used to be... In fact, almost the opposite. The resurrection of Jesus had changed everything. Nothing would be the same again – not for Jesus and certainly not for his followers.

And that’s a notion, isn’t it, that’s been discussed a lot in these days as we ponder what sort of world will emerge after these days have passed.

We’ve seen so many good things happen in recent weeks - good things and good people emerge in the midst of such trying days and we hold on to the aspiration that at least some of these good things will continue... that those who have delivered food parcels or engaged in community projects might continue that work as they are able... that the new understanding and insights we have gained into those whom we once took for granted but now call “key workers” will continue too... that we will continue to learn of the importance of family bonds and community unity... and, most importantly of all, that we will have gained a fresh insight into the things that are really important and stop sweating so much about the small stuff so that we can see the bigger picture.

How much will have changed will depend, of course, on how much we make it change and how much of these moments that we choose to take with us when our current circumstances begin to alter.

Learning of, and adapting to, such changed days was not easy for the disciples following the resurrection of Jesus.

One thing that had changed for them was, of course, where they were currently staying... still in Jerusalem all those weeks after they had seen their Lord crucified and risen again... Still in the very place where they had been but, in all reality, didn’t actually want to be.

Staying in Jerusalem was a risky old business. Being identified with someone who had been punished by crucifixion was not a particularly easy reality to live with – tainted by what others would think of them solely on the basis of the company they once kept.

So, that much has changed and, you would have thought that their understanding of what had just happened to them and to Jesus would have altered their understanding of faith too. That, however, seems to be a step too far.

At verse 6 of Acts chapter 1 we read the following – “*Then they (the disciples) gathered round him (that is Jesus) and asked him ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel’...*”

Hold on a minute... Did we read those words correctly...?

“Are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

No – we were right the first time... they did utter those words and it is the first indication that perhaps the resolve of the disciples to live this changed life, that Jesus had always spoken about, was starting to waver...

Wibbly wobbly disciples...

Or as one writer on this passage memorably calls them, “*Dunderheads*” ...

If it had been anyone else other than Jesus at the receiving end of these questions the response might have been quite different... one of anger and frustration... mocking... accusing...

Not that we haven’t all, at some point in our lives, asked a seemingly daft question... or a question that perhaps we really should have known the answer to, if we had been listening in the first place.

I have vivid memories of sitting totally confused in a Maths lesson at High School in either first or second year – I can’t quite remember... However, for me, confusion in a maths lesson was not an unusual experience which led me one day to take myself and my jotter to the teachers table at the front where she was busy marking some work... “*Miss*”, I said falteringly, “*I don’t know how to do this*”... “*Robin*” she exclaimed, “*we’ve just spent the last three weeks on this topic... I think I am going to have to set a class test on this!*” ... I was still none the wiser... got loads of flack for asking a seemingly dumb question from my classmates – although that teacher never did set that test. Maybe she’d calmed down... or maybe she simply forgot...

Jesus could have done the same to the disciples, just as he could have done the same to you and me a thousand times over...

Even now, we can imagine the weary voice of Jesus muttering under his breath, “*didn’t we go over this before... hadn’t I explained to you that the sort of Kingdom of which I have consistently spoken about has nothing to do with power and glory but rather has to do with service and witnessing... with going and telling and doing... with loving and caring... and here we are, after three solid years of you watching me embody all of those things - so that I was showing what I meant as I said the words - and still you come to me with yesterday’s question... with the question I have spent three years asking you not to ask*”

In their favour though, the point Jesus was making was somewhat harder than the sums I couldn’t do in my Math’s class all those years ago. None of this makes much sense, especially if you try to understand it too quickly.

After all, at this point Jesus hasn’t really asked them to do anything at all, except just to hang on in there... to give it a bit more time to sink in until that day, when the Spirit is sent into their midst, that their purpose will become a bit clearer.

And it is that point, after explaining it all once again, that Jesus is taken from them...

Luke, true to the simplicity of the life of Jesus, doesn’t even embellish the image of Jesus being taken to heaven with a multiplicity of word pictures and metaphors...

There are no trumpet calls and winged seraphim’s dancing across the sky...

Verse 9, “After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight”

Understated... but life changing too... Jesus once again showing them that in the days to come much would be expected from them in a very changed world.

All they needed to do now, though, was to stop staring at the cloud drifting into the sky... to stop craning their necks towards heaven and start looking again to world that they inhabit where there was still much work to be done and many lives still to be changed. **Let us pray**

Closing Prayer

Loving, heavenly Father, in Christ you have given us a new and a deeper understanding of you. In Christ you have given us a message for the world and in Christ you have promised the presence of your Holy Spirit.

And yet, we are also reminded, that it is important to wait and to watch... to take our gaze away from the mysterious things above us so that we might see and be inspired by the seemingly mundane things around us. We know that is where Christ served in his earthly life and where he calls us, day by day, to do our serving too.

So, we pray this day that you would enable us to be a waiting people – not just a people waiting for lockdown to end but a waiting people who look to the work that is ahead of us.

We give thanks for the many who have risen bravely and with sincerity to the challenges that these days have brought and we ask that the lessons learnt today would travel with us in the days to come.

We pray too for those for whom the days are long and often weary. Enrich them with your presence and reassure them that they are not forgotten by either you or us.

We pray for your church that even now we may fulfil our mission to preach in Christ’s name. Bring unity of purpose amongst your people we pray.

And, as we do each week, we pray for those working on the frontline of caring for others at this time in whatever capacity they do so. Bless them in all that they do.

And hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you through the risen and ascended Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, Amen

Benediction

As our worship draws to a close may God’s people, not be left standing still, gazing into heaven as the disciples did after they saw Jesus leave.

Instead, may we – God’s people - take up the mission Jesus has left us...

Let us be his witnesses and tell everyone about the Jesus we follow and love.

Let us tell how it is that Jesus has changed us and calls us to action.

And may the grace of God, the love of Jesus Christ,

and the presence of the Holy Spirit go with you all this day and forevermore. Amen.