

CH4 437 – “He is exalted” CH4 441 “Blessing and honour and glory and power” CH4 438 – “The Head that once was crowned with thorns” CH4 448 – “Lord, the light of your love is shining”

Acts 1; 6 - 14

Have you eaten all your Easter eggs yet? Believe it or not, for once I still have Easter Eggs left! Here we are at Ascension which is the end of the Easter season and I still have a bit of Easter left!! And the significance of arriving at Ascension – well, here we reach a change in the Tempo and the focus of the Christian Year. Since Easter Day, the whole focus of our attention has been on Jesus, the risen Jesus. The Jesus who was alive, but changed, the Jesus who bore the marks of his suffering on his hands and in his side. The Jesus who had died, but was to be found walking with, talking with, eating with his disciples. This resurrected Jesus who could be touched but not clung to. This risen Jesus who was, not a ghost or a spirit, not just a fond memory, but a physical presence. Now, the early Christian writers need us to understand that things change again. That embodied Jesus disappears – the Acts description tells of a cloud which took him. Jesus disappears to be reunited with God and they are left.....well how are they left.....it was all incredible, unbelievable, but the resurrection had been equally incredible, unbelievable.

The disciples were left gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.

Jesus disappears and the focus now turns to the group he left behind him, the disciples and followers. The community that was left behind.

It was such a difficult time for them. They had watched Jesus die on the cross, had felt the pain and despair of Good Friday. Then, the Resurrection, the fear, the amazement, the perplexity, the tentative hopes of Jesus rising from the dead. Gradually, over the days and weeks, they’ve become used to having him around again. No matter that he has spoken to them of leaving them again, they have become accustomed to having him there. Now, their beloved and inspirational leader has gone again and whilst it is different this time – they know that he is alive, they know that he has defeated death – but nonetheless, it’s no wonder that they stood and stared at where they had last seen him.

During the week when I was thinking and reading about all of this, I was struck by the words of an Australian commentator. He wrote ‘Heaven as depicted in the Bible, is not usually “up there” but coming towards us.’ How true that is! The Bible talks about heaven as being nearby, being close to us. The Kingdom of heaven is ahead of us, constantly breaking through, taking root, growing imperceptibly. What the Ascension story tells us is not how

Jesus came to be taken away from us, but rather about how Jesus came to be present everywhere. To quote Nathan Nettleton again ‘Heaven is God’s love and life breaking into our present reality, and Jesus is in the midst of that, constantly drawing near, constantly reaching out to us.’

If we want to see Jesus, if we want to know his presence, then we need to be looking at events and people all around us, rather than just staring into the skies. Bishop William Willimon tells of getting caught in a massive traffic jam caused by cars bumping into each other while the drivers tried to watch a man climb the outside wall of the Sears Tower in Chicago. Their eyes were on the sky and not the road and so everything came to a halt. And Willimon commented that some Christians are like these drivers: “They’re trying with all their might to keep their eyes on Jesus, but don’t notice the people around them. Sometimes people get hurt as a result.”

The disciples went back from the mountain where Jesus disappeared, back to Jerusalem. ‘All together were constantly at prayer together with a group of women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.’

Before Christ’s followers could advance, they would have to retreat to an upper room for prayer and empowerment. This is also a truth for those of us who are modern followers of Christ; we often need the clarity, the power, and the peace of mind that come from waiting in prayer to be empowered for the future that lies ahead of us.

Next week, we will arrive at Pentecost and we will hear again, how the story moves forward. But for this week, we are with the disciples, shut away in prayer. All being well, we will next week take tentative steps towards loosening the lockdown that has confined us. If the lockdown period has taught us anything, it has taught us about waiting. Our Ascension reading reminds us that when we do begin to move outwards again, Jesus will already be there, bringing heaven towards us. We know that the world will look quite different in the next while, we know that there will be considerable challenges – and I suspect, considerable opportunities for us as a community of faith. As we wait for the Spirit to guide us forward, there is a wonderful opportunity for us to keep company with the disciples in prayer.

The Moderator is encouraging everyone to join him in taking part in the Thy Kingdom Come global prayer movement.

Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair has backed the Scottish Church Leaders Forum in calling all Christians to join the ecumenical season of prayer, which will run from Ascension Day, 21 May to Pentecost Sunday.

The Scottish church leaders have released a statement saying: “On behalf of the undersigned churches in Scotland, we welcome the opportunity to participate in the Global Prayer Initiative: [Thy Kingdom Come 2020](#).”