

**28 May 2017**

**Responding to the ascension**

**John 17.1-11**

**Acts 1.6-14**

Responses to the ascension of Jesus

Looking up

How do we respond to the ascension of Jesus?

The obvious answer is that we should 'look up'.

Lifting our eyes above the humdrum, and the normal, above all that is crass and broken about our world, and worshipping the one who has been exalted to the highest place.

- in a world where young children attending a pop concert can be the targets of terrorists, we need to lift our vision to gain a new perspective on our world

We might want to follow the encouragement of Paul, who says, "Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3.1-2)

But I wonder what images are in our mind as we 'look up' and declare Jesus to be Lord.

During the early years of the Christian church, Christians seem to have followed the tradition of Judaism in being reluctant to make any images of Jesus. But when early images of Jesus did begin to emerge, the very earliest images seem to have been that of the good shepherd – a shepherd carrying a sheep across his shoulders.

And of course this image has so much resonance with the teaching of Jesus – the parable of the lost sheep; and his teaching in John about being the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

But then something happens in Christianity. The emperor Constantine is converted to Christianity, and Christianity becomes institutionalised as a state religion.

And rather different images of Christ begin to dominate. Not least the image of Christ as Pantocrator – Christ robed as an emperor-like figure, sitting on a throne. And these huge figures began to dominate the basilicas.

And we have to ask, “Which of these two images is most like the Jesus of the gospels?”

When we look up, and declare that Jesus is Lord, which image dominates for us?

Did you notice how the angels said to the apostles, “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.””

*‘This same Jesus’* – the character and ways of the ascended Lord are the same as the character and ways of the incarnate Lord.

In a while we will be taking up one of the declarations of faith of the first Christians in our hymn, ‘Jesus is Lord’.

When we sing that, I wonder where our emphasis is? Do we sing ‘Jesus is Lord’ with all of the emphasis on Lord, so that who Jesus is is determined by what we think it means to be ‘Lord’.

In other words, if we know how Lords and Kings and Emperors act, then we will know what Jesus is like.

Or is the emphasis on Jesus? – Jesus is Lord.’

When the emphasis is on Jesus, then how we understand God to reign in this world, how we understand God to exercise his Lordship in the world, is shaped by the character and ways of Jesus.

If the emphasis is on Jesus, then Jesus will be reigning, not in the mode of emperor or king, but in the mode of the good shepherd – ... or better still, if we take our imagery from the book of Revelation – the one who sits on the throne is the Lamb slaughtered from the foundation of the world.

Look up ... but be cautious in your looking up ... and certainly don't get paralysed by looking up.

In the story the disciples are stirred out of their looking up into the sky by the angels.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking into the sky?”

The ascension may have brought closure to the earthly life of Jesus, but it wasn't a closure that came with the kind of finality that death brings with it. This was not closure that needed to be met with mourning and a sense of loss.

There was a departure ... but without the finality ... much more like waving someone off at an airport.

“This same Jesus will return ...”

You are still involved in an on-going story – Jesus is still involved in an ongoing story.

So don't just look up ... look forward ... the story of Jesus has not finished!

The constant refrain of the New Testament is that Jesus who came in human flesh, was crucified and was raised to new life, who has been exalted to God's right hand, will come again when God's kingdom is brought to its ultimate completion.

Now this language of Jesus 'coming again' can sound somewhat odd in our modern secular and scientific world – and particularly when we no longer think of God residing physically 'above the sky' – out there somewhere. It sounds rather too much like the mythical longing for some superhero to come and put everything right.

But they used this language of 'Jesus coming again' because it was the best language they had to capture a deeply held conviction about God.

They held onto a deep belief that this world is not all that is should and could be, and that God the creator of this world would ultimately bring in his kingdom to put everything right – and they would talk about the coming *kingdom* of God, the coming *day* of God and indeed of the coming of *God* to his world.

Now for the Christians, following the resurrection of Jesus, they were convinced that Jesus is the 'human face of God' ... that Jesus represents to us all that God is ... and if God is going to come in the future to bring in his kingdom, then that future coming can only be expressed as the coming again of Jesus, because God's coming can only ever have the look and feel of Jesus of Nazareth, because that is what God is like.

One of the old telecoms companies, Orange, had the wonderful advertising slogan 'The future's bright, the future's Orange.'

The language of the second coming of Jesus was the early church saying, the future is bright, because the future – God's future – looks like Jesus.

And so the celebration of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ was always about a looking forward to the future of God, and God's coming reign, in which the one who reigns supreme is none other than the Lamb of God who has been slaughtered since the foundation of the world.

Don't stand there looking up, and looking back but look forward ...

But they have already been challenged by Jesus about the dangers of looking forward in an unhealthy way ... you can get caught up speculating about all the wrong things.

Luke tells us that over the forty days following the resurrection of Jesus, the risen Lord had been teaching his followers about "the kingdom of God".

And quite naturally they were eager to know what form the kingdom of God – the reign of God – would take, and wondered whether they were about to see the breaking in of God's promised kingdom.

The expectation of the people of Israel was that their Messiah would usher in God's reign – and the manifestation of that reign would be in a resurgent nation of Israel, standing proud again as an independent powerful nation among all the nations of the world ...

And so they ask: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel."

But Jesus' response is that it is not appropriate for them to speculate about the timing of God's ushering in of his kingdom – the Father will do this in his own good time ... and in closing off speculation about the timing, it is also as if Jesus is closing off speculation about the shape that this kingdom will take.

By all means look forward with hope and anticipation to the promised future that God will bring – but leave the timing and the shape of this within the hands of God and God's wisdom.

They are assured that the shape of the future will be crafted by Jesus ... because Jesus will be the coming One of God ... but beyond that speculation is unnecessary.

And not least, because in the meantime there is work to be done – the work and mission of God in the world is still to be fulfilled.

And he diverts them from this speculative looking forward, and calls them to 'look within'.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."

Don't spend all your time looking forward speculatively, you need to be open to what is going to happen deep within you.

So yes, look forward ... but in the same way as we cannot spend all our time 'looking up', nor can we spend all our time 'looking forward'.

We have to look within ... because we are promised the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives ...

If there is any story in the pages of Scripture that the story of Jesus' ascension is like, then it is probably most like the story of the end of the life of the prophet Elijah.

There is no record of the death of the prophet Elijah. Instead the story is told in 2 Kings chapter 2 of Elijah making a journey through Bethel, Jericho onto the Jordan river and beyond into the wilderness. The apprentice prophet Elisha accompanies him throughout the journey and won't be shaken off.

After they have crossed the Jordan Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he is taken away.

Elisha asks to inherit a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

Elijah replied, "You have asked a difficult thing. Yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours."

And as they were walking along, the story goes, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, separating the two of them, and Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

And Elisha returns empowered by the same spirit that had empowered Elijah.

The actual scene of Jesus' ascension is much more understated than that of Elijah – no fiery chariot or whirlwind – Jesus simply disappears from their sight in a cloud, symbolising the presence of God.

But this story too is about the passing on of the baton of God's work, through the pouring of the Spirit of Jesus into the lives of his followers. For this they have to wait a few days, but the promise is given.

And it is the remarkable promise that

- the same Spirit who came upon Mary, enabling her to give birth to Jesus
- the same Spirit who came upon Jesus at his baptism, with the voice from heaven proclaiming 'You are my Son, whom I love.'
- the same Spirit who anointed Jesus to preach good news to the poor,  
to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind  
to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
- the same Spirit through whom Jesus taught the apostles following his resurrection

this same Spirit was promised to all who looked to follow Jesus.

With the growth of the charismatic movement and various renewal movements in the church over the past thirty years or so, there has been a great deal more focus on the work of the Holy Spirit.

My personal journey of faith has not taken me through charismatic renewal ... but I am enormously grateful to the charismatic renewal movement for reminding the wider body of the church that at the heart of the Christian faith there is that inner transformation and empowering that comes from the work of God's Spirit ...

The Christian is invited in the overflowing grace of God to live an empowered life ... where we do not have to find the resources for living in, coping with, responding to our world from our own wells ...

... we do not have to dig our own wells, and find our own supplies of water ...

... those inner resources we need to live in, cope with, and respond to and make a difference in our world come as gift of God, by God's inner empowering of us through his Holy Spirit.

And ultimately we are bound to our risen and exalted Lord by the presence of his Spirit within us.

It is our looking up and our looking forward that enables us to look within, not in a narrowly insular way, but in a way that enables us to open our lives to the indwelling of the God who has come to us in Jesus.

This kind of inward looking that opens our hearts to the free movement of God's Spirit is:

- a letting go of our ego,
- a letting go of that compulsion to be self-sufficient,
- it is a letting go of all self-loathing and self-hatred that is self-destructive
- it is a letting go of the need to control ourselves and dominate others
- it is a letting go of the narrative that we are worthless and useless

because we are looking within in, not to our own powers and resources, but in order to open ourselves to the welling up of God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus within our lives.

But, of course, because this is the Spirit of Jesus who is given to us, we can never remain looking within.



The Spirit of Jesus is given that we, like him might 'look out' ... and look out widely.

"You will receive power when my 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."

I find it extremely interesting how these words are spoken, because although you *could* read them as a very firm command – a stern expectation placed on the apostles and followers of Jesus:

"You will receive power when my 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."

Actually, the most natural way to read this is Jesus simply describing the consequence of what will happen when their lives are touched by the Holy Spirit –

"You will receive power when my Spirit comes on you; and as a consequence of this, as a result of this you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

- Jesus isn't placing a demand on them.
- He isn't issuing them with a command or order.
- He isn't giving them a programme of activity or a scheme of work.

He is describing to them the kind of people they are going to become as a result of the impact of the Spirit of God on their lives –

- you are going to become people whose lives bear witness to my life
- and you are going to become such people and your impact will ripple out to the ends of the earth.

And if you read the story of Acts carefully, Luke is very careful in the way in which he tells the story of the spread of the church.

The people live their lives under the influence of the Spirit of God, and God then makes things happen.

At the end of chapter 2 we have a description of the life of the early Christian followers of Jesus, learning together, worshipping together, caring for one another. And Luke adds the comment: “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

In chapter 6 a division breaks out in the church between the Hebrew-speaking section of the church and the Greek-speaking section of the church, and the church finds a way of resolving the problem under the guidance of the Spirit. And the story ends with the comment: “So the word of God spread.”

Now I am not saying that the church should not engage in intentional evangelism and mission ... clearly Luke also tells us the story of some of the intentional evangelists. I am simply saying that there is also another dynamic at work here – a dynamic that comes about when the people of God open themselves to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

When our lives are taken up by the power of the Spirit of Jesus, then we become agents of Jesus in the world ... agents of his love and compassion, agents of his transformation:

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Born in Spain, Teresa entered a Carmelite convent when she was eighteen, and later earned a reputation as a mystic, reformer, and writer who experienced divine visions.

*Christ Has No Body*

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
[Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.]  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

And again, we need to hear these word descriptively and not prescriptively.

It's not a case of, 'Buck your ideas up! Jesus needs your hands! Go and offer your hands to Jesus, or Jesus will be short-handed.'

By his grace, this is how it is. This is what God will make of us. This is how God can use us.

With our lives open to his Spirit, we become the body of Christ ...

So the call of this story of the ascension of Jesus is:

Look up – lift your eyes to see the exalted One.

But don't just look up, look forward – anticipate the one who will shape the coming of God to the world.

But don't just look forward – look within – Jesus wants to invite you into his own life by sharing his Spirit with you.

But don't just look within – look out – for empowered by the Spirit of Jesus we are invited to be part of his mission in the world.

