

Acts 1: 1-11 (Psalm 47); Ephesians 1: 15-23; Luke 24: 44-53

Today our readings focus on Jesus' ascension into heaven, which tradition tells us takes place 40 days after Easter. Our gospel reading gives us a glimpse into it, and our first reading lays it out in much more detail. In a nutshell, Jesus went up to heaven, leaving his disciples as his witnesses here on earth. And, just 10 days later, which we celebrate next Sunday, came the Holy Spirit, in a rush of wind and fire on what we now know as Pentecost. Jesus, whose ministry covered a small portion of the world, ascended to heaven to make room for the Holy Spirit, who, in many ways, has had a much farther reach. After all, because Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine, before his death, resurrection, and ascension, he could only ever be in one place at once. But the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit can be (and is) everywhere! Encouraging us, inspiring us, leading us! And the disciples stand there, staring up at heaven, until the two "men in white robes" remind them that there's little value in standing there, staring up at heaven. Their work is still here on earth.

When I was en route to get my weekly rapid test at Alderny Gate Public Libraray, I saw a homemade chalk sign that said something along the lines of "The world is ending. Read your Bible." In some ways, that sign doesn't seem so far off. I definitely agree with the "read your Bible" part. In fact, I've found myself doing that more this year than ever before, and I don't think that's a bad thing. And, in some ways, the world seems like it's having nearly endless crises these days, and especially with the threat of the pandemic looming large, it may feel like we're living life at the end of the world. When we look at the Book of Revelation and all the scary predictions found there, it can be easy to interpret what we're seeing in the world these days as aspects of that, coming to life. And yet, people have been predicting the end of the world – and Jesus' second coming – pretty much from the moment he ascended into heaven. There have been wars, plagues, famine, and all the rest throughout human history, and people have often interpreted it as Jesus' time to return. Because we're all so anxious for that to happen, for our world to become what God wants it to be. That's part of why the disciples were watching heaven so intently, waiting for Jesus' return. And yet, things happen not in our time, but in God's time.

We are supposed to be prepared and ready and watchful for Christ's return, at any point and time. Matthew even reminds us to "keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come," but it seems like that's meant to be more of a mindset, a way in which we operate daily, living our life in the best way we can, according to God's will, for when Jesus returns, rather than assuming that we're actually living in the end times and to let it all go. In some ways, thinking this is the end of the world is a bit of a cop-out. To believe that these are the end-

times means that we don't feel the same need to care about what's happening around us, because it'll all be over soon enough, and then it'll be someone else's problem, or at the very least, not our problem. But we can't live life that way. Reading our Bibles is a key point, yes, but if we don't take what we read and learned and apply it to the world around us, we're not really taking the right message from what we've read.

It turns out this Sunday was also declared Jerusalem Sunday by our national church back in 2013. A Sunday when we pray for Jerusalem and the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, which covers the region of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. A part of the world that is beautiful and holy and in turmoil, all at the same time. Their diocese just installed a new bishop, Archbishop Hosam Naoum, on May 13, and I'm sure that while that was a time of hope and joy for many, it also comes in the midst of an increase in hostility between the Israeli and Palestinian people in the area. It's an issue that many are vaguely aware of but that many don't speak about because it seems 'messy'. But I can't let that stop me from speaking about it, and the oppression the Palestinian people are facing. I'm in the process of learning more, and I encourage you to do the same. Because when it's an issue of human rights, and human lives, it impacts all of us, as humans, no matter where we live. We need to stand up, speak up, and speak out. When it comes to oppression, we cannot be neutral. I've used this quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu before, but it continues to ring true: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." As Christians, we're called to speak up for those who are oppressed. It's even echoed in today's readings, as the Rev. Prof. Patricia G. Kirkpatrick reminds us:

The message of Acts, as with the message of the Ascension, is that the church, in the power of the Spirit, will be called to bear witness to Jesus Christ precisely at the places where society and governments are drifting away from the good which God intends for the created order.

It is precisely at these places that things begin to get 'messy' as we, you and I discern the will of the Spirit in accordance with Scripture, tradition and the church. It is the expectation that as disciples this is precisely what it is that we are to do in all parts of our lives.

On this Jerusalem Sunday, and as we reflect on the readings from Ascension Sunday, the time when God's instrument in this world went from being Jesus, instructing his followers directly, to a great number more followers, being led by the Holy Spirit, may we feel God's call to act against oppression in its many

forms, both at home and abroad. We are called to be God's hands and feet in the world around us, to every person we meet. That involves us speaking out, as Jesus would, against oppression and injustice. May we not simply be neutral.

Amen.