

Sermon by Bishop Karen

24<sup>th</sup> May 2020

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Over the past few months many of us have done a lot of looking up. Beautiful clear skies, very few aeroplanes, and clear starry nights. It is amazing just to gaze up at the stars, to look out for the meteor showers and the International Space Station pass us by.

On a good night it is such an impressive sight, however the thing I always end up pondering is the sheer vastness of it all. I remember when the Hale-Bopp comet came into view in 1997, three times brighter than Venus, with a tail stretching across the entire sky and being told that it would then disappear from our sight for thousands of years. It's hard to comprehend, our smallness compared to the vastness and unbelievable dimensions of time and space.

Often when I ponder such things I get confronted by the bigger questions – why did humans end up on the earth? Why is so much else of the universe unexplored and unpopulated? Why am I where I am in the great picture of it all? I am sure during these past weeks, some of us have been pondering such questions and more around the Covid-19 virus, its origins and its effect.

We have a glimpse of some of this in our Ascension readings. God had come down to dwell with the disciples, as friend and Saviour in Jesus, and was now returning to the Father. The physical, human encounter between humanity and God had come to an end. What could be tangibly measured would once again become a hidden mystery.

As the arrival of meteor showers, or comets, or viruses with their vastness interrupts our lives, so God in Christ had for 30 plus years permeated history. God in Jesus Christ came as close to humanity as is possible to do; he became one of us. As St Paul put it in one of his letters 'The light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' His life, summed up words of the Creed, began and ended with the human condition and lives were touched and changed because of this. Single and married women, working men of all political persuasions and children – all were embraced by him. He challenged them and changed them, through his words, his love and his healing touch.

Then with his work on earth accomplished and the triumph over death complete Jesus left the disciples behind. Being left behind is not a good experience. It's a bereavement experience, there is a sense of loss and aloneness, a terror as to how one is going to cope. The disciples had already been through this once after the crucifixion and now they faced it again.

However, Jesus had made careful preparation. He knew how hard it would be and I think the fleeting resurrection appearances, where once Jesus was there and the next he was somewhere else, were his way of helping his disciples cope with his physical absence, and help them to come to understand that he had won a victory over the forces of evil which had put him to death.

In St John's Gospel, before his crucifixion, Jesus says to the disciples 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and I am going to the Father.'

Time does not feature in God's overall plan. Thirty-three years in the light of all the years before Christ's birth and the over two thousand years after are nothing. Yet thirty-three years was enough to demonstrate what God, the Logos, the Word is like. The Bible, the living Word of God, demonstrates this well. In one way it is a history book – telling us about the faithful people of God and giving an account of Jesus' life and ministry and the emergence of the Church. Yet in another

way it is infinite in telling us the truths about God – we read it but there is more it can say, we know it yet there is no much we do not know. It spans an age and yet it is as relevant to our lives today as when it was written.

Jesus' ascension may have marked the end of God's tangible, physical presence on earth as a separate human being, in so many ways just like you or I, yet it was but a moment in human history, God's involvement with humankind. Its significance is eternal.

The disciples had been left with a mission – instructions were given to them, not just to be completed in their lifetime, which would have been impossible, but for followers to continue for years, decade and centuries to come. 'Go therefore make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave to you.' Matthew 28: 19 - 20

The task that Jesus left was more than a lifelong one. It has taken us over 2000 years and we still have to translate the whole Bible into many languages. In fact, with 6500 known languages in the world, so far, the New Testament has only been translated into 1500 of them. Another perspective of our own ministry being just a season in a greater scheme of things.

The disciples were given a legacy to pass on – the good news of the Kingdom of God and their bereavement was eased by the promise of the Holy Spirit – they would not have to be alone to do the work for God would give them a helper. Not a finite tangible super-human being, limited by age, race, geography, gender and language, but the Holy Spirit, a limitless resource, the power of God which can permeate all times and places.

William Temple wrote these words 'The Ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from the earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth. During his earthly ministry he could only be in one place at a time. If he was in Jerusalem, he was not in Capernaum, if he was in Capernaum he was not in Jerusalem. But now he is united with God, he is present wherever God is present and that is everywhere. Because he is in heaven, he is everywhere on earth; because he is ascended, he is here now. In the person of the Holy Spirit he dwells in his church, and issues forth from the deepest depth of the souls of his disciples, to bear witness to his sovereignty.'

The disciples were instructed to wait. That is a hard thing to do, as we are currently experiencing, waiting for the right time to venture out, to book a holiday, to open our church buildings, to meet family and friends. Considering the personalities of those friends who surrounded Jesus. I doubt that they liked to wait any more than you or I. Yet the Bible is full of waiting, Abraham and Sarah; the journey to the promised land; Job waiting for an answer. In Psalm 27, we read 'Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.' Waiting is so often a spiritual discipline. As someone once wrote 'There are times when the hardest thing in the world is to do nothing, yet there are times when that is the only thing to do. There are some things we can work for; there are other things we can only wait for.'

No doubt the disciples wanted to know more, however a cloud took Jesus out of their sight. It seems to work that way, doesn't it? At the very moment we want Jesus to be most vivid, something obscures him.

Strange as it seems I take comfort in that. The life of faith does not lend itself to easy answers. Our current situation certainly does not. Our task of witnessing is unquestionable, but the where, when and how are not always so obvious. We go about our work with clouded vision, with things not always as clear as we might like them, just like the disciples.

We so easily grow impatient of God's delays, don't we? Much of our trouble in life comes from our restlessness and sometimes reckless haste. We cannot wait for the fruit to ripen; we pick it green. We cannot wait for the answers to prayer, although the things we may ask for may require many years in their preparation for us. We are urged to walk with God, but at times God walks so slowly. It is indeed fortunate that God is faithful as well as patient because so many times he has to wait for us, either to catch up or to slow down.

In the waiting times, our eyes are meant to be fixed on the present moment that God has given us. We are called to live now in the way God intended us rather than to live in the future. In the times of waiting, we need to trust in the Lord to come through. It's a pause to take a deep breath.

The future holds tremendous, unfathomable opportunities and it is in staring into the sky and contemplating the heavens, that I realise the awesomeness of God. That he who made the entire universe which I cannot understand, comes to me and makes available to me part of himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. That, like the disciples, I have a part to play in his enormous plan for the world. That I inherit the task given to the disciples.

It literally blows my mind. That God comes to me and I can talk to him, laugh and cry with him and he doesn't mind!

The Ascension is neither the end nor the beginning of God's work. God gave the disciples all they needed to cope with the bereavement of Christ's departure, and they carried on. We too are neither the end nor the beginning. Our self-importance fades into insignificance when we look up into the sky. For there were others before us and will be others after us. All we have in the Church is to be passed on to others. As we say in the welcome at each Baptism service, we are all 'inheritors together of the kingdom of God.'

So this weekend, we have cause to wait and to pause just as the disciples did and to contemplate the greatness of God, to consider our little part in his great plan of things, and to think about our response to the God who knows us intimately, comes to us now, if we ask him, and gives us the task to share the good news about him with others.

May the power and the mystery go before us, to show us the way,  
shine above us to lighten our world,  
lie beneath us to bear us up,  
walk with us and give us companionship,  
and glow and flow within us to bring us joy. Amen