

Unfinished Business

NT Reading: Acts 1:6-14

Gospel: John 17:1-11

Easter 7: Ascension Sunday

When an individual leaves a job, or departs from this life, there are two issues that hang in the air: The first is completion – a job done, a life lived. The second is unfinished business - it's rare for a person to leave a completely tidy desk with all the ends tied up. Today's readings remind us of this: the Ascension, which indicates that work remains to be done, is both an episode of completion, and for us who are left behind, a tremendous episode of unfinished business.

What exactly happened on Ascension Day has never been clear. In Acts, Luke describes it as best he can: As the disciples watched, Jesus "was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight". Artists have struggled to illustrate this – in some of their pictures Jesus floats in the sky, surrounded by cumulus clouds; others show simply the soles of his feet. But such details are unimportant. However Jesus' departure happened, for those who were there on that day, one moment he was with them and the next he was gone, vanished. He had done what he had come to do, and they were left with his unfinished business. The question of the Ascension is not "How did he do it"? or "Where has he gone"? and certainly not "When is he coming back"? but "What remains for us to do"?

The disciples were told first to wait - until they would be empowered to take up Jesus' work: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". Jesus had promised that his departure would not leave his disciples orphaned, but that he would send his Spirit to be with them – and with us two thousand years later, to dwell among and within us all, helping and enabling us to carry on his mission.

The feast of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday is said to mark the beginning of the Christian church. Ascension, one of the most forgotten feast days of the church year, is the day that eleven people, with nothing but a promise and a prayer, responded to the call to become the church. As they stood with their necks craned looking up, wondering what

on earth was happening, what Luke describes as two men in white robes appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. "Men of Galilee", they said, "Why do you stand looking up towards heaven"? The message was to look around instead, at each other, at the world, at the ordinary people in their lives, because that was where they were most likely to find Christ, not the way they used to know him, but in a new way, the risen, ascended Lord who was no longer in any one particular place on earth, but everywhere - not in his own body, but in their bodies, continuing his work; work which is never done, and will remain undone as long as one child goes hungry, one war continues or one person remains homeless, lonely or uncared for. There is still much unfinished business for God's people here on earth.

That's quite a challenge, and it raises the question that faces us daily: how do we go about carrying out this task that has been passed to us, now that Jesus is no longer here to do the job for us? We have heard his commission before, but that does not make our responsibilities less important: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, wage peace not war, love our enemies, take care of those on the margins and fringes, be the salt of the earth and light in the darkness. Now that Jesus has left the world, we are called to be his witnesses. This means we are not only meant to worship him here on a Sunday, we are meant to be Christ in the world.

That is an awesome responsibility, and many of us may feel like those early disciples who wanted to say, "But you're just getting going. Why are you leaving now? Why are you giving all this responsibility to us when we can't possibly manage it"? But there must be some divine conviction that we can manage it. In spite of our faults and our frailty, God has the confidence that you and I are able to do what we have been commissioned to do, to be witnesses of Christ's presence in the world. That's a big challenge, but it's also a gift.

The Rev. Peter Gomes tells of a visit to Winchester Cathedral many years ago. The west front was covered in scaffolding and the service he attended was a celebration of the completion of the restoration of that front. Several years later he returned and was surprised to find scaffolding once again, this time on the south front. "I thought you had finished all that work" he said to the Dean. "A cathedral's work is never done", the

Dean replied, “We retain permanent scaffolding; we just move it from one side to another”.

A cathedral’s work is never done, and so it is with this church, for there is always something to be done. We have here a beautiful, if challenging building, which always needs something done to it, but the heart of this place is not to be found in the bells, or the triptych or the stain glass windows, but in you and me, Christ’s witnesses, whose business is Christ’s unfinished business in the world. There is much to be done, many needs to be met, and many opportunities to be seized. That is the work of this church, and it will never be done until Jesus comes again.`

That is the good news of Ascension, that we will always have something to do, and something worth doing. So don’t stand gazing up into the skies, mourning Jesus’ departure and wondering when and how he might return. Jesus has not retreated, he is leading the advance, so let us go forward in his name until the day when he comes again in glory, and the whole world unites to celebrate the completion of his work.

Amen

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