

Ascension Day 2022 – Acts 1:1-11 ‘I’ve started, so I’ll finish...’

I must confess it’s a long time since I’ve watched it regularly, but growing up my family were great fans of the TV quiz Mastermind. In those days it was Magnus Magnusson asking the questions, though many of you may be more familiar with more recent hosts such as John Humphries, or the current host Clive Myrie. But the basic format hasn’t changed over the decades: same chair, same music, and also something that always sticks in my mind as one of the iconic TV catchphrases: whenever we get near the end of the round and the dreaded bleeper goes, if the host is midway through asking a question you’ll hear those immortal words... *‘I’ve started, so I’ll finish.’*

It’s always good to finish what you started. But I would say that, because on one of the many personality tests I’ve done over the years I come out as a ‘Completer Finisher’: in other words, someone who doesn’t like to leave a job half done. It’s quite an annoying trait when I won’t stop a TV series halfway through even when we’re a bit bored of it; but it has its uses too – it was certainly quite important in my previous career of project management. Not much point being a project manager who never finishes projects!

And, dare I say it, one thing we learn from the magnificent but often overlooked festival of Ascension Day is that Jesus is a Completer Finisher, too. Let me ask you a loaded question: is the Ascension the end of something, or the beginning? So often we think of it as the end of an era: the completion of Jesus’ earthly life, after which point we have to manage without his physical presence on earth.

But actually the thrust of the key Ascension text – the beginning of Acts and our passage for today – is that **Jesus’ Ascension is more a beginning of something than the end of something.** It starts in verse 1 – Luke introduces the book as follows: ‘In my former book, God-lover (that’s what Theophilus means), I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach.’

Hang on – Luke’s previous book was the gospel, which covered the whole of Jesus’ earthly life, from his conception right up to his resurrection and even after his resurrection. And yet, Luke says that this entire earthly life can be summarised as what Jesus ‘began to do and to teach’. In other words, Luke says, Jesus has barely started! That’s interesting..... how on earth does that make sense?

The answer, of course, lies in what Jesus goes on to teach his disciples. **The reason Jesus has to ascend to heaven is that until he does so, he can’t pour out his Holy Spirit.** Since the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, all the time that Jesus remains in human form on the earth, this work is limited to the body in which he dwells – powerful though that is. However, once he is in heaven, then he can pour out his Spirit on his new body – the body of Christ – i.e. all believers, anywhere, at any time.

As Jesus says in John’s gospel: ‘It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate (i.e. the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.’ Picking up that teaching from John, Jesus says here: ‘Wait for the gift my Father promised... in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ He continues: ‘You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.’ (vv4,5,8)

This is why the remarkable life and ministry of Jesus can be said to be just the beginning of his works. Jesus will now continue that same work bringing the salvation and healing of the kingdom of God for the rest of history, through his worldwide body of disciples! Thousands of years, hundreds of millions of people, all blessed with the indwelling presence of Jesus by his Holy Spirit.

No wonder Jesus' life was just the beginning. Like a great prologue in a book, it sets the scene and determines everything that follows: but the rest of the book still has to be written. And we are part of that book. **We too can receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and be part of what Jesus continues to do in this world.** We can all add our paragraph to this book, the works of Jesus in this generation.

And just as the angels also reminded the disciples not to look forever into the sky after the Ascension, so we too are meant this day to be energised by these glorious truths to go back out into the world, to serve the mission of the kingdom of Jesus. **Jesus is still saying to his church: 'I've started, so I'll finish.'** This same Jesus is coming back.

In fact you could say, that the parting words of the angels declare that Jesus is the ultimate Completer Finisher. He won't leave Project Kingdom unfinished: he is coming back to finish the task of renewing creation and bringing the eternal life and glory of God to our hurting world.

This is the message of Ascension Day. We can celebrate it as an ending, of course we can: but it's also a glorious beginning. Jesus says to the world, indeed to the whole of creation: 'I've started, so I'll finish.'

Will you help to finish what Jesus started?

Amen, come Holy Spirit!