

### Ascension Day Inspirations (posted 2023)

*Ascension Day (coming up on Thursday) is the great forgotten festival of the Church. To help redress the balance, in the days leading up to it, we'll look at the passage in Acts where Jesus ascends into heaven, and ask ourselves: why does this matter? And how can we be inspired today?*

#### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> May – Acts 1:1-3 'Began to do'**

In 2007 Alan Hirsch published a book called 'The Forgotten Ways'. It posed the powerful question: when Jesus ascended back into heaven, he left just 120 active followers; when the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 312AD, the Christian faith numbered approximately 10% of the entire population of the empire – or about 20 million people. During that 280 years, followers of Jesus had been heavily persecuted, their faith was essentially an underground movement. It had no buildings, no public officials and thousands of its followers had been executed during periodic pogroms.

So – and here comes the question – just how did this tiny group go from 120 to 20,000,000 (a 166,000-fold increase) in less than 300 years, with all those odds stacked against them? His follow-up question, and the reason for the book, was obvious: what can we learn from them today? What are 'the forgotten ways'?

I won't reprise his answers here; but as we look forward to Ascension Day on Thursday, I'm always struck by this little phrase at the beginning of the Book of Acts: (v1) 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach.' Surely Jesus had done plenty? More than just 'began'...?

But that's the point: yes, he'd performed dozens of miracles – hundreds or thousands probably, of which 37 were recorded. Yes, he'd taught like no other teacher in history, and loved with a selfless, unconditional heart of humility that both amazed and scandalised those who saw it. Yes, he'd risen from the dead, the most extraordinary act of all.

And yet... and yet... it was just the beginning. What Jesus was limited in doing by the confines of a single human life – no matter how amazing that life was – would be limited no longer, once he ascended into heaven. After that, he could send something even more extraordinary: his very self, in the form of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ. Once this Spirit was poured out, then all followers of Jesus would be able to live as he lived. That's what 'Christian' means – little Christ, little Jesus.

Now there are hundreds of millions of little Jesuses, trying to do and to teach, just as Jesus did and taught. We may each of us feel but a pale shadow of the Master. And that is true, up to a point – but even our small contributions, our loaves and fishes, make a difference.

We need the Ascension: to continue all that Jesus began. May the Lord graciously continue that (ascended) work in us, and through us, today.

## Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> May – Acts 1:4-8 ‘Wait for the gift’

Today’s title is one that could often be said about my present-arranging skills. I’m not much good at remembering birthdays, I’ve lost count of the times that I’ve had to fess up to friends (or even family) that a gift was definitely coming – they just had to be patient, and wait a few days for it!

Probably my best/worst moment in this regard came when my wife and I got engaged. I had designed the ring myself (very romantic); but the ring took longer than planned to arrive, so wasn’t ready on the weekend when I had hoped to propose (not so romantic). After some stern words from one of my best friends, who told me in no uncertain terms that the act of proposing was far more important than whether the little box was ready, I did the deed the very next day, atop a mediaeval castle (romantic brownie points restored!). My wife-to-be just had to wait for the gift. (As a postscript, when the ring did arrive 2 weeks later, the fitting looked perfect, but was the wrong metal, so it had to be sent off again... d’oh!)

Nevertheless, the best gifts are worth waiting for. Today, Jesus tells his disciples to wait for the best gift of all (v4) – his very self, poured out into our hearts, by his Holy Spirit. It’s easy to forget that, when Jesus says these words, the disciples don’t know how long they will have to wait. Hours, days, weeks, months, years? All Jesus told them was to wait – and that the wait would be worth it: ‘you will receive power...’ (v8)

I wonder if that ten-day period of waiting felt interminably long, or refreshingly short? We’re told that they remained constantly in prayer (v14), which is tiring, so am guessing that by the Feast of Pentecost, they were starting to flag a bit. Waiting is hard.

If you’re anything like me, you’ll also have experiences of waiting for something from the Lord: sometimes it comes very quickly; and other times, it seems to take forever. We are God-chasers, but the chase can be a variable length. If you find yourself waiting on the Lord at present, let today be an encouragement – may it raise your faith to trust that the Lord will respond. You may or may not get the answer you long for: but he will certainly give you his powerful, soaking presence, sufficient for whatever life throws at you.

We need the Ascension: to call us to wait for the greatest gift of all. It’s a gift Jesus loves to keep on giving. ‘Keep being filled with his Spirit...’ (Eph 5:18) – may that be the reality for each of us today.

### Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May – Acts 1:8-11 ‘To the ends of the earth’

As a family we’ve been enjoying watching ‘Race across the world’ on the TV over the last few weeks. The idea is simple: five pairs of people, with limited budgets, have to travel a huge distance: in this series, from one end of Canada to the other (which, with huge deviations north and south, totalled more than 16,000km). Along the way, this series in particular has showcased the kindness of strangers (many of whom were quite obviously Christians) and some lovely healing in fraught family relationships – in other words a huge amount of grace amidst the race to be first.

We also saw some extraordinary landscapes. I must confess Canada has gone straight into the upper echelons of my ‘most want to visit’ list – both for the people and the amazing scenery. And it was a powerful thought to remind myself, as I watched one fantastic location after another: there is nowhere we can go on earth where Jesus cannot say, ‘this is mine’. It’s all His!

Apart from the escape to Egypt as an infant, as far as we know Jesus never travelled outside the land of his birth. All of his work was done, and his words were uttered, within approximately a 150-mile radius. And yet he is a global Messiah, his message is for the whole world. How can he spread his loving and merciful rule *everywhere*?

We need the Ascension: so that Jesus’ kingship can be declared to the ends of the earth. And this declaration will principally be through his followers, empowered by his Spirit. For as long as Jesus is limited by his human body, his message can only spread effectively as far as he can, within human constraints. But the ascended Jesus can empower his followers to witness on his behalf everywhere.

History from the time of Jesus’ Ascension is essentially a race across the world – to share the gospel, to make disciples of all nations, to declare the love and reign of Christ to hungry hearts. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him; and thanks to Pentecost, he is powerfully with us, even to the end of the age. As we look forward to celebrating Jesus’ Ascension tomorrow, let’s give thanks that we do so from every corner of the globe. And as we join with Christians in over a hundred countries to pray for Jesus’ mission as part of the Thy Kingdom Come prayer movement, may the Lord grant us grace to keep running our race, for His glory.