

Year A

Acts 1:1-11

We find ourselves this morning right at the end of the Easter season. Our minds may be more at ease now as the astonishing stories of the resurrection have had time to influence us afresh, stimulating our thinking and inspiring our living. But right at the end of the season we are hit with another concept that puzzles and perplexes us. Where is Jesus now? Where is the Father's right hand anyway? Ascension Day always occurs on the Thursday prior to the Seventh Sunday of

Easter, forty days after Easter Sunday. We do not gather for worship on Thursday and so today is our celebration of the Ascension of our Lord. I think it is fair to state that this is the most understated of the three key events which make up Christ's act of salvation: his death, resurrection and ascension. The three may be only truly understood as a unity and so neglect of one will distort our understanding of the whole.

If the resurrection stretches our incredulity with its outrageous claim of new life from death then the ascension likewise seems to beg us to believe beyond reason. Comic

stained glass windows depicting a cloud with a pair of legs sticking out underneath it may make us laugh but it's uncomfortable because what on earth or beyond was going on? What are we actually being called on to believe here? One of the essential elements of the incarnation is that Jesus entered into space and time to live and identify with humanity. His resurrection body carries the marks, the evidence of that space/time experience and his continuing existence in the resurrection body implies that that space/time experience is real in some kind of meaningful sense. Recognising the work of

Augustine and the insight of Albert Einstein we can acknowledge that time is a further dimension of spatial location. I penned this sermon at 57.43.14 degrees North and 3.17.35 degrees West at 10.24am on Thursday 11th May. Where is Jesus in those terms at that precise moment? Of course, we can't specify that. We can say, consistent with the New Testament, that he is not here, but that he is elsewhere, at the right hand of the Father. Could we say that he has ascended to the future; the future in God that changes the present? For example, when we pray, "give us this day our daily

bread” we may also be praying, ‘give us this day our future bread”, the bread that is promised to us now, which we are awaiting: because it can be translated that way. None of this is easy but we must not settle for less than the fulness of Christ.

Jesus remains fully human, located in time and space, yet unseen by us. If indeed he is in the future of God’s purposes we can be sure that he reaches to us from that point. He is not too far away. He is not remote. The early church believed that the very particular ministry of the ascended Christ to all of humanity and the created order is

prayer. He remains both truly God and fully human and he continually prays for us. Now for all of us and especially for those of us who struggle with prayer and I would think that would make up the majority of us, that is particularly good news. The one who understands me. The one who has been tempted as I am and knows my weaknesses is at continual prayer for me. Even more than that my feeble attempts at prayer are lifted up into his prayers and presented freshly before the Father with all the purity and precision of his own prayers. Therefore prayer is not something we do before God

but instead it is the means of relationship within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prayer is a mystery at the heart of God into which we are invited. At its centre is the priestly, mediatory work of Christ who must find himself ascended in space/time to participate in this work. He is not a willow-the-wisp spirit in the sky. He is the fully human, resurrected son of God.

Furthermore, because he has come here, taking on himself the heavy burdens of our existence he is able to effect for us a release from our plight into the fullness of his new life. He is able to bring to us from God's

future the hope of the fullness of that future which we can begin to experience even now in the present. Christ is representative of a new humanity which he heads and as all are included in his suffering and death so too are all included in his resurrection and ascension. This humanity established in him is absolutely inclusive for it is God's honour and reputation that is at stake. Our plight did not require a patch up. It needed a brand new start and that's precisely what we have in Jesus Christ.

From his place in space/time Christ is bringing the justice of God to us. His

prayers are active in bringing change into this world through humanity. It is important to always keep in mind that God wishes to redeem the world and not to destroy it. The saving work of Christ is not offering an escape out of the creation but is offering a new creation: an old creation made new. Therefore God's righteousness and justice are paramount in the world now. Remember Christian Aid's old slogan; "we believe in life before death." That's another way of saying we believe in the ascension of Christ. We believe in his reign and rule over all creation. Therefore what happens on earth now is

critical. If that were not the case then what would Christ's priestly ministry consist of? What would be the point of his prayers for us and for the world?

This new reality is mediated to us through the risen, ascended Jesus Christ who exists in space/time. That's something of the significance of the ascension for us now. I hope we are able to see today that it is no minor doctrine but that it is at the centre of salvation. In the ascension we experience the life giving Jesus at work in this world today. We have a confidence that God is not going to walk away from us but will continue

the work that is built on the accomplishment of Christ.

This is all a long way from the group of disciples who were left gazing up to the clouds as Jesus disappeared. How were they to understand the fact that he was no longer with them? The church has often remained rooted to the spot, gazing into nothingness. We need the chastisement of the angels to shake us out of our dreaminess to take hold of the amazing repercussions of Christ ascended. As we do so, we find ourselves invited to participate in the fellowship of the

Godhead, bringing change into this old, tired
world.