

Today is Ascension Sunday, the day we set aside to celebrate the departure of Jesus from this earthly world of ours – his earthly ministry now finished.

Early Christians believed that the final departure of Jesus ushered in the beginning of a new relationship between Jesus and his followers and between Jesus and his emerging church. This event was celebrated more 2000 years ago than it is today. We do not mark the event with a great feast such as we hold at Christmas and Easter. Nevertheless, the ascension event is important in our faith understanding of Christ's ministry to us for it prepared the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

For the first generation Christians, the two events of significance following the crucifixion of Christ were the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We celebrate the feast of Pentecost on Pentecost Sunday which is next week. The ascension holds a peculiar middle position between resurrection and Pentecost. There is little mention of this ascension in early Christian teaching. In all probability, it was not viewed then as so complete a break between Jesus' earthly fellowship with his disciples and the beginning of his heavenly reign as it has been gaining in significance through the centuries.

St. Paul does not refer to this event at all. He does however numerate the many appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. In fact Paul perceived the appearances of Christ to the original disciples as little different from his own encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. For Paul the risen Christ, even when he appeared to the original eleven, was already clothed in a "spiritual" or 'glorified" body. So perhaps for Paul, the removal of Christ from this earth was little different from the wonder of the resurrection and in fact was the completion of the resurrection events.

A tradition soon grew in the early church concerning the importance of the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension of Christ. These days were deemed valuable for it not only allowed Jesus to visit the disciples and other men and women, it also affirmed clearly the authenticity of the resurrection experience of Jesus. As they told anyone who was willing to listen, He who had been dead now indeed was alive. They themselves had been witnesses and so they proclaimed what they had seen and what they experienced.

Whatever actually occurred in the ascension of Christ to the heavens, the exaltation of Jesus at the right hand of God quickly became an integral part of the earliest Christian creed. Early Christians had no doubt that Jesus had reclaimed his rightful place with God the Father. This appearance of Jesus at the right hand of God they now understood required that Jesus had to finally leave them. Though they missed him and feared for the future, they knew the plan of God was unfolding as it should.

We read in verse six, chapter one of Acts, the disciples, when together with Christ before the Ascension, asked this question: "Lord, will you at this time restore again the kingdom

to Israel?” When Jesus spoke of the promise of God, we must remember that many of them thought he meant the restoration of the free and independent kingdom of Israel.

The disciples in this passage are pictured as once again misunderstanding the meaning of the “promise.” They still connected the promise of God to the renewal of Israel as an independent nation. The earliest expectations of the disciples may well have been that this renewal of Israel will occur now that the resurrection had restored Jesus to them. They would be looking to the personal return of Jesus as the sign of the coming of this new and free kingdom in Israel.

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus speaks much of the coming of the kingdom, but little of the coming of the Holy Spirit. But by the time Luke wrote Acts, the church had realized that the truest return of Jesus was in the bestowing on believers the power of the Holy Spirit. The exciting realization for the followers was that Jesus was never away from them as his spirit was and is always with men and women of faith.

Jesus had uttered these words: “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in his own power.” In other words, Jesus was cautioning them that patience will be demanded of the followers, for things happen in God’s own timeframe. Their job as is ours is to always be ready to respond to anything that God deems to do for the good of the world.

These words remind me of ancient words in the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes: “If you have faith in God, you can accept that he has ordered all things according to His own purposes and a life centered on God is not purposeless and meaningless.” This theme of God’s time and God’s purposes has been a constant in scriptures and the experiences of faithful believers.

Then Jesus goes on to promise that all of the people present would receive power with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them. Each of you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth, said Jesus. These words from Acts hearkened back to words in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus commanded his followers to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

Luke in the Book of Acts now reminds everyone of a key message of Jesus. Jesus had commanded his people to take the gospel to all men and women across the face of the earth. Jesus was specific that he meant even the Samaritans who most Jews saw as second class citizens in matters of the true faith.

This command to go to all peoples was a tough one for some who thought Christians would be a select chosen group in that part of the world. Not so, said Christ, you must rise and get up. Take my message to all who will listen for there is only one true God who created all, loves all and for whom he sent his son into the world that they might all believe. And by all people, he meant all people.

To Jesus, all people were worthy of hearing the good news and having the opportunity to ask for forgiveness and believe. It is not up to you to decide who is worthy of God. Go and preach the gospel to all who will listen.

This command of Jesus is very clear. Christians are to care for all people. This regard is to be for their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. If God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, then who are we to decide who counts and who does not?

Then Luke goes on in Acts 1: 9 to describe what happened. A cloud took Jesus out of their sight and he was physically gone. Just when they most wanted more from him, he vanished. A cloud took him out of their sight. Remember, before the coming of Christ, that the prophet Daniel spoke of one like a Son of man who would come with the clouds of heaven. In the Old Testament, the incomprehensiveness of God is represented by the cloud that hides him from view. So here we have Jesus received into the same cloud of divine glory. This great symbolism is not accidental. It connects the old promises of God as known through the testimony of writers in the Old Testament with the new promises of Jesus.

So, we have the scene being set for the Pentecost experience. Jesus, his earthly time and appearances needed to come to a conclusion. Only when he left, could the great gift of the Holy Spirit be given to men and women across the globe and be available to believers throughout subsequent centuries.

The Old Testament speaks of a time to live and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to harvest. The scriptures are a story of God's plans unfolding in his own time. You and I have but a brief time here on earth. We are the same as the people of old – we want things to move quickly while we are still here to experience it. God, however, has a different sense of time which transcends our understanding of time and space.

When we think of our sense of time and history, we know it is different from the sense of time and history of other peoples.

An illustration of what I mean:

When I was in China a few years ago, I visited the Valley of the Kings not far from Beijing. This is the area where the Chinese Emperors and Empresses were buried. It is a large valley with mounds of earth covered with vegetation. Few tombs have been opened and fully explored, their treasures in the tombs dug up to go on display. I asked our guide why the authorities were not opening more. He said there was no hurry – they had been there for hundreds of years and in good time they would be opened. There was no need to rush just so the present generation could see what was there. China, he said, had a different sense of time from the West.

Another example of this I came across when visiting a Chinese centre dedicated to the 20 million Chinese killed by the Japanese army before the Second World War when they occupied North East China, an area they called Manchukuo. The guide spoke with bitterness and passion of these atrocities and said China would never forget.

One day, he said with great certainty, they would avenge this senseless carnage. Do you think this would be in the next few years, someone asked? It does not matter when, the guide said, for the Chinese have a long term view of history. The one certainty was that it would be avenged in this century or the next.

A different view of time and history

Back to God's view: God thinks long term. His plan for the unrolling of action is on his time schedule. Discovering God's plan and timeframe has always been the story of the scriptures. Human beings being human beings become very anxious and want God to move more quickly and reveal more of Himself to us. More than that, men and women desire God to intervene and make right whatever their need in quick response to their appeals and prayers. Where is he, we cry, has he abandoned me altogether? Does he not know my pain and anguish for a loved one or for myself?

God's time, not our time: This is hard for us to fathom and accept even though we understand that God has the freedom to do as he plans. We believe he loves us. We believe he has created us. And yet, we desire the world to be more as God originally planned when he created it. How we wish this ideal world would come about in our lifetime.

Think of what the first Christians felt. While Jesus was among them, they believed their faith could not be shaken. Then their faith was tested in the death of Jesus. News of the resurrection of Jesus thrilled them and rekindled their faith. As they saw him again and listened to him, they were filled with certainty about his identity as the Son of God. But now he was gone and they felt vulnerable in their faith. Would they be strong enough to not waiver in the faith under the reality of the taunting and cruelty of non-believers?

Luke makes very clear in Acts that Jesus was more than aware that he had to remove his presence from this group of new believers if God's plan was to be carried out. The promise of God to send his spirit into the world required Jesus to end his sojourn on earth.

The faith of those left behind would be enriched and invigorated by the gift of the Holy Spirit. With Jesus gone, people needed to test and exercise their faith by telling their faith story to others.

As we read of the faith adventure of early Christians, we become informed about our own. We too want to be in the presence of Jesus where it is safe and easy to believe. However, Jesus sends us out into the tough world. Go, for I am with you even to the ends of the earth. Do not be afraid. Speak of your faith as you have experienced it yourself. Show by how you live what it means to be a child of God.

We do not know what God has in store for the world. All we have is our faith. God created us, he loves us and he wants the best for everyone. And, God excludes no person from this love and neither should we.

My earthly ministry is over Jesus told his followers. Now it is up to you. I have faith in you. Do you have the faith and courage needed to follow me? I believe you do and God will send you the gift of his spirit. Wait for it, for when it arrives, I will expect great things of you. Go to all nations and declare what you know. Honour God through your actions, words and the community you build and I will be pleased with your gift.

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