

The Ascension of the Lord

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Introduction

Change and Conflict inevitably accompany each other. It is 40 days since the Easter Event of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection. The disciples had experienced despair, hopelessness, confusion and bewilderment. All they knew was shaken to the core. In Luke's account of the Ascension as the disciples face the fact that they have seen Jesus for the last time, they are filled with joy and thankfulness to God. How is that possible? How was their conflict resolved?

Text

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Comment

Understanding the Scriptures

A central reason why Jesus was rejected and finally crucified was because he challenged the orthodoxy of how the Scriptures were to be understood. Differences in how we read scripture and discerning its meaning remains deeply problematic

for the Christian Church. Within the Hebrew Scriptures widely divergent teachings are openly acknowledged and accommodated. Part of our Jewish inheritance as Christians is that theological argument and debate is a necessary part of seeking the truth.

The current heated conflict between Christians on how we read and apply Scripture to our lives should enable us to empathize with the disciples as they struggled to reconcile their understanding of scripture regarding the coming Messiah with the traumatic events of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus insistence that forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations was another profound challenge to the personal and communal sense of privilege of being God's chosen people. If the disciples' were unable to overcome this conflict over identity and belief, the entire Jesus project could have been jeopardised.

Looking back on the story of the forty days between Easter and Ascension we see how the risen Jesus prioritised addressing this conflict through

His Presence. Jesus appeared to the disciples, not once but many times

Dealing with the past. Jesus didn't paper over cracks, he named the disciples failures and responded with forgiveness.

Confronting the challenges of Change. Jesus addressed the disciples fears and doubts and spent time so that their minds could open to understand the scriptures in a new and radical way

Reassurance about the future. Jesus gave them a doable task, to be witnesses, to tell what they had seen, and promises them the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus example teaches us that conflicts require time and thoroughness if they are to have a positive outcome.

This passage ends with a very understated account of the Ascension. Jesus brings his disciples to Bethany, blesses them and withdraws..... Jesus is gone !

Yet the disciples are blessed and joyful returning to the temple in Jerusalem to worship God. Jesus departure was well prepared for. The conflict was transformed and preparation made for the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the Church.

Response

a. A crisis holds the possibility of learning what is important and reassessing your priorities. What have you learnt during the forced changes imposed on you by the COVID 19 pandemic? What priorities have changed? What preparations are you making to ensure this learning will last?

b. The experiences of the Easter Event and meeting the risen Christ deepened the disciples relationship with Jesus. How has your understanding of Jesus changed over the years? What led to that change?

c. The Disciples were called to be witnesses, to tell the story of what they had seen. Can you discern something of the Jesus story of which you are an authentic witness?

Prayer

Compassionate God,
You know our weakness
And our struggle to understand.
Open our minds to see your work in our world
That we may be witnesses to your loving purpose
And bearers of hope in a needy world.

Amen

Season: Ascensiontide

Themes: