

Feast of the Ascension – 2010

Nic Denny-Dimitriou
 Sunday 16 May 2010
 Church of the Ascension, Hilton

Lectionary Readings for the day

Daniel 7: 9 – 14

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1: 15 – 23

Luke 24: 45 – 53

Brief intro to service commenting on our Christian Heritage – as we celebrate 106 years since a parish was formed in Hilton Road Village (1904), and 103 years since our church was dedicated for holy use on Ascension Day 1907 (built 1906 – 1907). Prayers of thanksgiving followed.

~~~~~

Partings from people important to us are generally difficult. A child parted from a parent for a while – say, if the parent is going to hospital for a while, or traveling away, can be traumatic and a cause for anxiety. If mum or dad goes away on a business trip, it puts extra strain on the family. Emigration is a special cause for sadness, even in these days of modern travel – one parishioner buys a round-the-world ticket every couple of years and takes several months to visit her 3 adult children and their families in New Zealand, the USA and Switzerland. It is hard being parted for long periods of time from people we love.

So if partings are usually negative, even traumatic, why does the church celebrate The Ascension – a parting from Jesus?

It is easy to understand celebrating Christmas. There's the whole "baby thing" of a wonderful child born who fulfils prophecies of ages before; the promise of what is to come, the name of "Emanuel – God with us" to celebrate.

It is easy to understand celebrating Easter, even with the harrowing focus on Good Friday. There is the fulfillment of a mission and ministry, and Resurrection to celebrate.

But Jesus going away?

Yes – that IS one of the perspectives given to us in the Feast of the Ascension. If you look again at today's Gospel passage, it is quite clear that the disciples, who were dismayed earlier at parting with Jesus when he was

betrayed and prepared for crucifixion, are described as now being joyful. They didn't seem to find this parting deeply sad.

Partly, it is because they had already had experience of The Risen Lord. Partly, it is because they looked forward to his return.

[Unfurl the cloth–painting of The Resurrection. It hangs in our church hall, painted by Andy Kruger from a large postcard of the same. The original is a very large modern stained glass window in The Church of the Resurrection, the Roman Catholic Parish of Bryanston, Johannesburg, where my father still is a regular worshipper and where Andy and I attended Saturday night services on our recent visit to JHB.]

This is one artist's rendition but it is a glorious one, bright in its colours, very life-like, not staid and thoroughly modern, with a sense of triumph. If you look at the hands, there is still the reminder in the remaining wounds of the Cross that has gone before. But the overall sense is of glory and majesty and triumph.

And that is what the Church celebrates at the Ascension, as much as in the Season of Easter. This Risen Lord is now also the Ascended Lord, gone to be with God the Father in Heaven.

And this same Jesus will return.

But WHEN?

Many of the disciples thought his return was imminent, and they reflected back on some of the things Jesus had said and assumed it would be in their lifetimes (comment on some of the NT writings).

I can understand the desire to have Jesus back. I too would like him here. Now. To do his "stuff".

Our Msunduzi Municipality has been in tough times lately, as everyone knows. And as the scale of the disaster became clear, the Provincial authorities finally swept aside existing leadership and management and brought in a person to oversee a fix-up process. His name is Johan Mettler – a name by now known to most of us – and has been described as physically tall and imposing, and not connected to local political leadership and therefore able to exercise authority forcefully in clearing things up.

I would like Jesus to come here, a bit like a cosmic Johan Mettler. A cosmic fixer-upper of things gone wrong. [I'd like to presume I'd be on the correct

side of Jesus, too – wouldn't want to be on the wrong side here. Of course, none of us would claim perfection...]

But Jesus isn't physically present in that way. And his return hasn't yet happened.

Aah – but God HAS returned.

God has come to us in Person – in the Person of the Holy Spirit. That is what we celebrate at Pentecost, and I won't say much about that now. Understandably, it seems not quite the same as a physically present Jesus. A "spirit" is less tangible than a physical Jesus walking about doing "his thing". I may still want my "cosmic fixer-upper" in person.

But the Ascension gives us a perspective on reality from God's perspective:

- The Risen Lord, Jesus, is in his rightful place in Heaven
- God is still with us, present to us, in the most amazing way by the Spirit (more on that at Pentecost)
- Jesus WILL return, though how and when remains an unknown...

And we are required to live as God's agents and in the knowledge of what is to come (Reference to sermon, 2 Sunday's previously, focused on reading from The Revelation of "the new Jerusalem, the new Holy City being prepared" etc.)

We have today's vision, from the book of Daniel, some centuries before the time of Jesus' earthly arrival, indicating things that will go on in Heaven – including "one like a son of man being given all authority and power and dominion" – a prefiguring of what happened with Jesus Christ

And I can hang onto that; given that other promises of God were fulfilled earlier in Jesus, I can hang onto believing that others – yet to be fulfilled – will indeed be!

Our God, in Jesus Christ, is enthroned and victorious and holy.

[Close with re-reading of some verses of NT reading, Ephesians 1: 17 – 21, read from The Message translation.]

~~~~~