

## **Looking up (Acts 1:1-11)**

Our bible readings today overlap. The last few verses of Luke's first book, the Gospel of Luke, and the first eleven verses of his second book, 'The Acts of the Apostles' which we know more simply as the book of Acts.

They are separate works, and were presumably written, or at least completed (or 'published' in modern terms) at different times.

Luke's gospel is the story of Jesus on earth – from the birth of John the Baptist being foretold, through the foretelling of Jesus' own birth, through that birth, through his baptism, his temptation, his calling his disciples, his earthly ministry, his death and his resurrection.

Luke's gospel ends with Jesus opening the disciples' minds so they could understand the scriptures, declaring the disciples are his witnesses, and promising that they will receive power.

It ends with Jesus blessing the disciples and then being taken up to heaven. The disciples then worshiped Jesus and returned joyfully to Jerusalem where they waited at the temple, praising God.

It is truly a happy ending to the gospel account. But the story, of course, doesn't end there. Sometimes we say things like the gospels are the story of Jesus and the book of Acts is the story of the church, but the better understanding is that the book of Acts is the story of Jesus working through the church – the church is the body of Christ, and the church without Jesus is nothing.

So at the beginning of the book of Acts, we heard that Luke addresses "Theophilus" which translates as, "lover of God." This might have been the name of a patron, but more likely could refer to anyone who loves God. It might well be addressed to us.

Luke starts off his letter to all us lovers of God – the followers of Jesus with a summary of what happened at the end of his gospel account – "[Jesus] presented himself to [the disciples] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (2:3)

The resurrection, according to Luke, wasn't just a fleeting event – it was a lasting thing – Jesus appeared to the disciples over forty days, continuing to teach them. And it was clearly a bodily resurrection too, because Luke talks about Jesus eating with his followers.

The disciples must have been overjoyed at Jesus' resurrection, but it seems that they still hadn't really grasped the point of what Jesus was saying when he taught them about 'the Kingdom of God', because after he told them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the gift – the Holy Spirit – that God the Father had promised," and they immediately asked: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6)

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” This was, after all, what the people had been wanting all along – for hundreds of years. A messiah who would liberate the promised land from the occupiers and restore the kingdom of David. This coming back from the dead is all well-and-good, but what we really want is worldly power and security – let’s go back to the glory days of the kingdom!

In response, Jesus lets them down gently, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” he says, “ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (1:7-8)

And then he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (1:9)

Jesus gave them a mission, ‘you will be my witnesses’, and then he was gone.

Then Jesus was gone. Just as Elijah was lifted up and Elisha watched him disappear in a cloud, just as Moses entered the cloud to talk face-to-face with God, the cloud that carries Jesus up is a sign of God’s presence, and also conceals his ascension from those watching. We don’t know how it would have happened – we talk about Jesus being taken ‘up’ but we know what’s up, don’t we? We know that heaven is not literally above the clouds, don’t we?

And then, just as Luke told the readers of his gospel about the two men dressed in white who were suddenly standing next to the women at the empty tomb, asking “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:4-5), here Luke tells us that suddenly there were two men dressed in white standing with the disciples, “Men of Galilee,” they asked, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?”

Why? Why do you think? Because they’d seen something amazing. We know that Jesus had been appearing and presumably disappearing many times over the forty days since his resurrection, but this was something different... and it was clearly final.

I don’t think those men in white – angels, if you like – asked why the disciples were looking up into the sky because they were interested, indeed, I think they knew, but I also think they were challenging the disciples. Like when we drive past a road crew and see a man leaning on his shovel – “Why are you leaning on your shovel?”, we might ask, not because we’re interested in why that man might be leaning on his shovel, but because we’re pretty sure that he should be doing something else.

“Why are you looking up into the sky?” those men ask, with the unspoken follow on, “when you’ve got a mission to carry out.”

Stop looking up there; and start getting ready to go out to be the witnesses that Jesus has charged you to be – go out to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (1:8b)

It was going to be a huge shift for the disciples. They'd followed Jesus, literally and figurately. And now he had left their presence. I'm sure that part of the disciples looking up to the sky wasn't just in amazement, but in the hope that he would come back.

I mean, the men said, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." – so, shouldn't they have been looking up and waiting? For that matter, shouldn't we today be looking up and waiting? Why worry about this mission, this being witnesses, this sharing the good news of Jesus with others, when he could be back at any moment and put things right?

But the problem with that is if we're just waiting – and wishing – for Jesus' return is that we end up ignoring the pain and sorrow and worry of the world, pain and sorrow and worry that Jesus is certainly concerned with.

Jesus had ascended into heaven – but he also promised to be with us even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Jesus may not be physically here, with us, as we carry out his mission, but he is very much *with us* regardless.

Jesus is every place he sent his disciples to be witnesses; Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth ... and that means here and now, as well. The mission that began in Jerusalem, and spread out to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth is here in St Ives in the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yes, that's all good. But wouldn't it just be better for Jesus to return as he left? It's part of the already/not yet" of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus began his ministry, he declared that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and that kingdom was fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection. But it is not yet complete. In his death and resurrection, the power of sin and death had been broken, but there was still more to happen.

And so we wait. As the psalmist cried out, "Relent, Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants." (Psalm 90:13)

Jesus told the disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority", and back when he was on the Mount of Olives he'd even said "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father". (Matthew 24:36)

And so, we wait, and we wonder what it is that is God waiting for. Those men in white – those messengers of God – did tell the disciples that Jesus would return, after all. So why not straight away? Why not any time in the last two thousand odd years? Why not today?

At the close of his second letter, Peter – who was one of those disciples looking up that day – wrote, "The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9)

God is patient. Patient with us.

God is patient with us because we're the ones who are carrying out the mission that Jesus gave to his followers.

We are the ones who are called to be Jesus' witnesses. We are the ones who are supposed to be sharing his good news, doing what Jesus did and teaching what he taught when he walked this earth. To be, as we sometimes say, Jesus' hands and feet (and ears and mouth) in this world.

We shouldn't be simply looking up to the skies as we wait for Jesus' return, instead, we should be looking up *figuratively* to Jesus. Look up to him as our example and as our saviour. Look up to him as the one who has given us a mission.

Following on from today's reading, we learn that after Jesus had been taken up, the disciples did return to Jerusalem, and they waited as Jesus had told them to do. Luke tells us that in that time they waited, they devoted themselves to prayer (1:12-13)

Soon after, as we'll remember in two weeks' time in church, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit would be poured out on them, and they would be empowered to live out Jesus' mission. And as they waited, they devoted themselves to prayer, just as they had seen Jesus do throughout his ministry.

It was time for the disciples stop looking up into the clouds, and become apostles who are witnesses to God's grace. To be looking out for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus. In the same way we shouldn't be looking up into the clouds, hoping or wishing for something to happen. Because Jesus is calling us to do something now, calling us to be witnesses to who he is and what he has done.

We should be devoted to prayer, as those early disciples were, and we should open our hearts to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to empower us and gift us, to carry out the mission.

But as we carry out that mission, let's not forget the promise that Jesus will return, and will return to put all things right. The mission we have isn't just a hard slog that will last for ever and ever and through generation after generation.

We can't fix all the problems of the world through our own efforts and nor can we bring about the completion of the kingdom of God ourselves, but we can help deal with the problems, and we can be part of the completion of the kingdom of God, as part of the body Christ.

Let's not stand around looking up, hoping and wishing, but instead let's look up to Jesus, to the mission he has not only given us, but has also equipped us to carry out, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God.

Amen.