

(Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53)

Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Jesus said to the disciples, '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.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

As some of you already know, before I switched careers (and when I used to work for a living!) I was an engineer with Nissan. 'Nissan' is a shortened form of the Japanese phrase 'Nippon sanyo', which means 'Japanese industry'. Phonetically, 'Nissan' also sounds like the Japanese pronunciation of the number '23' – and this is why whenever you see a Nissan racing car it is likely to carry that number.

Now take a look at this coaster... It shows a grid of what might seem to be random numbers. But if you add up the numbers in any column or row the total always comes to 33. And the significance of that number? Yes, it was the age Jesus was believed to have been when he died for us on the cross.

The next number in this series, of course, is 43. And today is the 43rd day of Easter, the Sunday after Ascension Day. As we all know, Ascension Day is the 40th day of Easter, and 40 days is the period after the Resurrection that the risen Christ appeared to his disciples and other witnesses. Of course, no one really knows the precise number of days in this period – or likewise how long Jesus was tempted in the desert before his ministry began. But '40 days' simply signifies a 'long time', and the actual period of resurrection appearances could just as easily have been 43 days as 40.

Here at St Mary's this year we have moved Ascension Day back by 3 days. But next year, as I mentioned last week, we might try celebrating the day itself. After all, Ascension Day, like Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday, is a 'major festival' in the calendar of the Church (what Roman Catholics call a 'holy day of obligation').

Some of us may even remember that it was once a Public Holiday in this country – and this is still the case in many other countries.

Now the Ascension may have signalled the end of the resurrection appearances but it was actually a beginning. We believe that when the risen Christ returned to heaven, to sit in glory at the right hand of the Father, he carried our humanity with him. In doing so he completed his work of our redemption, ushering in a new age in which we are fully reconciled with God. That age begins *now* – for anyone who places their faith in Jesus Christ: ‘through whom all things were created’, who ‘for our salvation came down from heaven’, and who having ‘ascended into heaven... is seated at the right hand of the Father’.

In a few moments we will declare our belief in these very things, and in doing so we will know ourselves to be reconciled to God: ‘righteous in his sight’. As you recite the Creed, I invite you to *feel* the sense of liberation, the true Peace, won for us by Christ. And later, as you receive the body and blood of Christ, I invite you to recall his will ‘that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us’.

These ‘holy mysteries’ are made tangible in our coming together as the Body of Christ in this place, in our sharing of Christ’s Peace, and in the bread and the wine. This physicality is all part of the Incarnation, of which the mystery of the Ascension is a necessary component. The overall purpose of the Incarnation is beautifully captured in R S Thomas’s poem, ‘The Coming’:

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

As we heard in our gospel reading, before the risen Christ left his disciples, to return to the Father, he said to them that the Good News of what had been accomplished must be proclaimed to all nations. And he made them a promise. He said that they must wait until they have been clothed with power from on high. In other words, he commissioned them to continue his work, assuring them that they would be empowered for the task. As St Matthew puts it, Jesus promised that in a new way he would be 'with them always, until the end of the age'.

As we now wait in this time of prayer and preparation for celebrating at Pentecost the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we recall that we too have been both commissioned and empowered from on high. But we can only receive that power if we stop and wait: even Nissan racing cars in order to refuel have to make a pit-stop! We stop and wait each week here in church; and each day in our private prayers. We say with the psalmist, 'On God alone my soul in stillness waits'.

So as we prepare to proclaim in word and deed God's love for those around us, part of our 'personal pit-stop' must surely be to pray that we may be worthy channels of his grace. And as we say the petition in our Lord's Prayer, 'Thy Kingdom come', I hope you have taken to heart the suggestion for this year's 'Thy Kingdom come' season: that we each pray by name for 5 people who we would love to know for themselves the God of love.

Another prayer we can be using is one that is said for the candidates in a Confirmation Service, but when said for others or for ourselves is truly in the 'spirit' of this 'Thy Kingdom come' season:

Defend, O Lord, your servants with your heavenly grace,
that they may continue yours for ever
and daily increase in your Holy Spirit, more and more,
until they come to your everlasting Kingdom.

Amen.