

Learning Roots and Gaining Wings

Back in October 2001 our eldest son, Rhys, started in Brighton University. His halls of residence were on the Falmer Campus and I remember Rowena and I driving him down there to start his university life. After we unloaded the car, Rowena insisted on making his bed. Rhys, quite rightly, was anxious to explore the campus and meet his fellow students so, eventually, we left him to it. On the way home in the car, Rowena was in floods of tears because one of our boys had left home. I couldn't understand this for the life of me. I was very proud because he was the first from the Griffiths' side of the family to go to university and. I suppose, secretly I was thinking 'one down – one to go'! For Rowena it was very different and I think she wept all the way from Brighton to the Purley one way system. Mind you the Purley gyratory is enough to reduce anyone to tears! For Rowena it was very much the 'empty nest syndrome'. It is said that parents can gift their children two important things – they can give them roots and they can give them their wings. Giving them their wings can be an emotional experience – both for the parent and the child.

Our readings today – from Acts and the Gospel of John – show us how Jesus was preparing his disciples to gain their wings. The Gospel is part of the 'Great High Priestly Prayer' which is only found in John's Gospel and takes up four whole chapters. In this prayer Jesus grounds the disciples in the faith – he describes their roots. The disciples remembered their roots for the rest of their lives and it formed the bedrock of their teaching and their life together. In the latter part of the High Priestly Prayer that we heard today Jesus prays for his disciples. Jesus knows his earthly ministry is now coming to a dramatic conclusion and he looks forward to the future where the disciples will be gifted their wings to carry on his work of spreading the good news and making new followers. It is significant that John places this great prayer immediately before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, and yet the church has placed it in the lectionary in the interim period between the Ascension and the great feast of Pentecost. It makes sense because the prayer is also seen as a farewell prayer.

Jesus acknowledges that the disciples were chosen out of the world to be his witnesses. He knows that this will be a tough assignment for them and that they will be facing a hostile world – so he prays that his father will protect them – and that they may be united – just as Jesus and his father are united.

This is a beautiful prayer and one which has tremendous significance for us gathered here this morning. We have been chosen to follow Jesus in 2023 just

as the first disciples were chosen to follow Jesus during his time on earth. This time between the Ascension and Pentecost is a good time for us to take stock of how effective our witness has been and how we can be even more effective witnesses in the future. Are we using our wings to soar? What greater resources do we need to fly higher?

St. Luke gives us two accounts of the Ascension – one in his gospel and the other we heard today in the Acts of the Apostles. In the account from his gospel, just prior to his Ascension into heaven, Jesus instructs his disciples to go back to Jerusalem and stay there until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. He wanted them to take stock of everything - to reflect on all that they had seen and heard during his ministry. Then, when the Spirit had been poured out upon them, they would be able to go out into the world to make new disciples. But before they went out, they needed to stop and wait. Luke tells us that the disciples obeyed his instructions and that in this interim period in Jerusalem they constantly devoted themselves to prayer to reflect, to praise and to pray about the task that lay ahead.

Luke's account in Acts is slightly different. A cloud came and took him from their sight. Cloud in the Bible often signifies the presence of God. We think of Moses going into the cloud on Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments. We think of the cloud that led the Israelites in the wilderness as they journeyed towards the Promised Land. Of course, there is the cloud that surrounds Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The cloud at the Ascension signifies that Jesus has passed into the Father's presence. The disciples were awestruck and we can imagine them standing around open-mouthed looking for Jesus and wondering what on earth (or what in heaven) was happening. In Acts, Luke tells us:

'While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

In other words, they were told to stop hanging around looking for a physical Jesus – things had changed – if people were to hear the good news of Jesus it was all up to the disciples now. The responsibility was theirs. They were about to be gifted their wings. What a huge challenge. But they were not abandoned to this task – they were not simply left to it. The presence of Jesus was as real now as it ever was. Their response was to go back to the Temple – which they

did with great joy and they stayed there continually blessing God. This is the challenge of Luke's gospel – a challenge that begins and ends in the Temple.

The disciples could have just got stuck into the task of preaching and teaching straight away. They knew that this is what they had to do. But Jesus told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait – to wait to be energized by the Holy Spirit. Without this period of waiting, reflecting, praising and praying they wouldn't have been very effective witnesses at all. They couldn't go back to the good old days – which it seems that they wanted to do. Luke tells us that when they gathered on the mountain, they asked Jesus:

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

This isn't what it was all about – it's restoring God's Kingdom to the world. That's what our mission is today – it is about bringing the values of the Kingdom into the world around us. It's about being a bridge between God's Kingdom and the world. It's about showing the glory of Christ that the disciples witnessed at the Ascension to a largely sceptical and often hostile world. It's about reflecting the glory of Jesus – being mirrors of his glorious light – not just by words, but by deeds as well. We can only do this if we keep going back to our roots and use our roots to 'soar on wings like eagles'.

Gustave Flaubert, the French novelist, once wrote

“I believe that if one always looked at the skies, one would end up with wings.”

We lead such busy lives that we often forget to stop and wait with Jesus. We look around, but forget to look up. For it is often in waiting and looking up that we receive. In waiting we are renewed and strengthened by the Spirit to be more sensitive and caring witnesses to the good news of the gospel. In waiting we are gifted our wings.

So, as we thank God for the glory of the Ascension of Christ into heaven and look forward to the gift of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost, let us take time to stop and wait – to rest in Jesus – to pray and reflect on our ministry together. Let us pray that we may all be one – at unity with each other, free from all rivalry, envy, jealousy and bonded together in the love of Christ – for these are our roots - and that God will protect us with his mighty power as we use our wings to go out into the world to live and work to his praise and glory.

Maybe in our time of resting and waiting we may become more aware of the presence of God not simply by looking up, but looking around. Here's a short poem written by Ruth Burgess –a Christian writer. She reflects on the Ascension and speaks to us about where we seek and find Jesus.

We look for you - straining our eyes into the far country. But our vision is disrupted by the least, the lost, the littlest, the last, among us. We race after you trying to catch up and turning the corner find only a homeless family in our path. We wander the streets yearning to find you, calling your name. But it is only a single mother who turns and wearily smiles. A street person who whispers 'hello'. A little girl who pirouettes and takes our hand Gone.....But you are still here Lord. Help us to see