

8th May 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 28 “Jesus calls us here to meet him”
675 “Because the Saviour prayed that we be one”
686 “Jesus, Lord, we look to thee”
690 “The Church’s one foundation”

READINGS: Acts 1:1-11
John 17:20-26

“THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE”

Last Thursday was not only Election Day but also Ascension Day. Not many Methodists mark Ascension Day – perhaps it is true to say that not many Christians really understand Ascension Day ... and that in itself is very understandable.

We have heard one of the Biblical accounts of the Ascension from the first chapter of the Book of Acts, it ran, “as they were watching Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight.” Let us look at the context of this passage. After his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples in many different places – in a locked room, on the road to Emmaus and by the seashore. These appearances happened for forty days. The disciples began to grow accustomed to Jesus being around – albeit in a changed form. But that situation could not go on indefinitely. As long as Jesus was around, the disciples were still dependent upon him and felt bound to stay around in the familiar places where they had been together. The disciples were always looking over their shoulders, checking if Jesus was around and not taking responsibility for the task that he had given them – to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Galilee, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

There needed to be an ending to this situation – a closure as contemporary language has it. But the difficulty for Luke, the writer of that passage in Acts, was how to present and explain Jesus’ disappearance from the lives of his followers. After forty days of appearing – where and how did he go?

Normally Luke was a very down-to-earth person, writing in a down-to-earth way. He was a doctor, he thought and wrote in a direct way. Here he was confronted with a very other-worldly happening, Jesus’ disappearance. So he wrote, “when Jesus had spoken, as the disciples were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight.”

Was this an actual happening? Or was it the only way Luke could imagine to explain Jesus’ departure? Luke could not have Jesus die because he had already died and defeated death. So the description of Jesus ascending to his Father is how Luke imagines Jesus moving beyond the lives and context of the disciples, to be freed from the constraints of time and place.

This happening recorded in Acts has been a challenge to writers, artists and preachers ever since. William Barclay, a well-known Biblical commentator of a past

generation commented, 'no one has ever succeeded in painting a picture of the Ascension which was anything other than grotesque or ridiculous.'

For modern, scientifically educated people the image of Jesus rising, rocket-like, into the sky is difficult to swallow. The idea comes from a time when the world was viewed as a three tier universe – heaven above, the earth below and the underworld below that.

We are left with the fact that Luke was trying to explain the inexplicable and doing it within the worldview of his time. After even we say 'heavens above' although we know that no spacecraft has located anywhere recognisable as 'heaven.'

What we can appreciate from our vantage point is that it was necessary for Jesus to depart from the earth, to return to his Father – if his Gospel was to burst out of 1st century Palestine and be carried around the world.

The Ascension of Jesus, however we try to explain it or conceptualise it for ourselves, ushered in a new era, indeed ushered in the beginning of the church – followers of Jesus moving out from their home area to witness to the Gospel. The message of Jesus was no longer confined to Palestine – it was now let loose to move beyond Jerusalem, beyond Galilee and Samaria into the world of the Mediterranean and beyond.

Around our gallery we have very visual evidence that the gospel did indeed break out from its place of origin. The flags represent the background of people in our congregation – all places to which the Christian has spread

This idea that the Gospel of Jesus had to be released from its origins if it were to spread around the world is also there in our passage from John's Gospel. In this passage where Jesus, before his Crucifixion, speaks to and prays for his disciples, he asks that they work in unity – not for the sake of unity itself but that the world might believe.

But the most amazing thing about this passage from John is not that Jesus was speaking to his disciples but that he is speaking directly to us. Jesus is telling his disciples that he is not only praying for them but for those who will believe through their words. Here Jesus is praying for those in every generation who will pass on the Gospel message – and that means right down to us.

It is so easy for those of us who have had Christianity in our families for generations to take the passing on of the faith for granted. We should never do that. It was missionaries from Rome and from Ireland who brought the Christian faith to these islands over 1600 years ago. Those missionaries had to travel difficult journeys, face aggressive pagan tribes, live for long years away from their home place – for the sake of the Gospel.

It was missionaries from Britain, Europe and America who travelled difficult journeys, met with hostile and resistant people, lived their whole lives away from their families

so that people in Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific should hear the Gospel – so that the world might believe.

The Good News of the Gospel and the Church itself is never more than one generation from extinction. In each generation it depends upon Christians sharing their faith and making the love of God known.

That is why Jesus is praying for us – “Father I ask not only on behalf of my disciples in 1st century Palestine but also for the congregation at Wesley’s Chapel in the 21st century – that they may be one, so that the world may believe.”

You would not dream of failing to pass on the gift of language to the next generation, our children and grandchildren how much more should you never be able to dream of failing to pass on the language of love – the love of God in Christ – to the next generation!

Jesus prays for two things for us – for unity and for our ongoing witness to the world. We should not mistake unity for harmony or for a false togetherness that ignores or glosses over differences.

Those of us gathered here today come from different family backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds. We have grown up in churches which have very different ways of doing things. Our flags are made of different colours and designs symbolising the life and culture of varied parts of our globe. It would be quite unrealistic to think that just because we enter the same building to worship that we will automatically agree with one another.

There were twelve disciples all from pretty similar backgrounds but they did not always see eye to eye. There was a lot of misunderstanding, status-seeking, rivalry and differences over the very nature of Jesus’ mission. They had to learn to work together, to learn from each other that they might witness together. It is just the same for us except to the power 10 or even 100. We are far more different from each other than ever the disciples were.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor, who stood out against Hitler and Nazism and stood out from his church which supported Hitler, wrote a book called ‘Life Together’ about how we should be with one another in our Christian community. He says, and this is very much out of his own experience, that it will probably be our experience that our Christian community does not meet our hopes and dreams of harmony and unity, He believes that we will only really discover ‘life together’ in Christ. He says that our struggles with each other, our sharing of different opinions enables us to see more clearly what Christ has done for us, in calling us together as brothers and sisters.

Our Christian community- our congregation for us at Wesley’s Chapel is where God puts us to live, learn and grow with each other. It is in our differences and in our struggles and hurts that we encounter and receive God’s grace most completely.

But it does not stop there. Our hard-won unity in Christ is good but not an end in itself – rather it enables us to model how human communities can live together

across traditional boundaries so that others, outsiders, non-Christians may say, 'see how these Christians love one another.' The community we model should be attractive for others if we are to be true witnesses for Christ. We are enabled to reach out in love to others because we are all aware of how we have been bound to one another by the love of God in Christ.

Jesus prayed to his Father that his followers might be one so that the world might believe. John Wesley looked upon the whole world as his parish, his concern. But we have to turn the abstract back onto the specific – the world into the communities where we live and work.

Wesley's Chapel is at the intersection of many worlds – the financial city to the south, the tech industries of Silicon Roundabout to the north, the night life of Hoxton and Shoreditch and the rich and not so rich people who live around us. These are the worlds where we are called to witness. Our lives are at the intersection of many worlds – at work, at leisure, at home or in the organisations to which we belong and where we are called to witness each in an appropriate and contextual way.

We are called to unity, to supporting, encouraging and challenging each other so that the worlds in which we move may believe and the love of God be known in our generation. Amen