

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Easter 2020.
Sunday after Ascension Day

Isaiah 64:1-4. Ephesians 1:15-23. Psalm 24. Luke 24:44-53.

The Collect: God, the King of Glory, who has exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to thy kingdom in heaven: we beseech thee, leave us not desolate; but send thy Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to the same place where our Saviour Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with thee and the same Holy Spirit, one God world without end. Amen.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

Luke 24:52,53 ‘And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.’

The word ‘blessing’ (εὐλογοῦντες) used in this verse can be interpreted as ‘calling down God’s gracious blessing upon all people’. Another word for it is ‘praising’ though there is a separate word for that too. Yet another interpretation is: ‘to consecrate something to holiness.’ You can also see a connection with the word ‘eulogy’, which is a speech in honour of someone. It has become a custom for a relative of a deceased person to eulogise them at the funeral, recalling good memories of their deeds and characteristics. Jesus eulogised his disciples on the Mount of the Ascension. Then he left them.... to get on with it!

Specifically, he left them to tell all nations, beginning from Jerusalem, that they should (or can) repent of their sins, and be forgiven. That’s what they were doing in the Temple together. They were explaining to people who had gone there to present sin offerings, thank offerings, and burnt offerings, that God would bless them if they repent of their sins. That location, the magnificent Temple on Mount Moriah, had been the very place where conflict had arisen when Jesus had cleansed it of the money-changers. It was the stronghold of ritualised religious practice. Indeed, despite the fact that the Shekinah (the dwelling-glory of God, the divine presence) is said to have departed from the Temple (Ezekiel 10:18), we should not imagine that it was devoid of genuine searchers for the living God. Remember, Simeon, and Anna, to name but two? Ezekiel (around 596BC), had preached to priests and elders of their idolatry and false religion that they had manifested in the Temple; and they were taken into captivity in Babylon as punishment. Now, Jesus had opened the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures, and they were told to go back to

the Temple and preach the reason why Jesus had suffered, died, and risen so that those who repent can be forgiven.

In effect, they were claiming the physical location of the Temple and preparing it for the return of the Shekinah, in the form of the Holy Spirit, who would dwell with penitents there and beyond the confines of the Temple area into all nations. They returned from the Mount of Olives with great joy to do this. Later, their journeys took them out to the diaspora, across countries and throughout time until the present day. Psalm 24 tells us: ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that therein is: the compass of the world and they that dwell therein.’

You might think: ‘What a contrast we now experience from the joy of the disciples preaching after seeing Jesus separated from them on the Mount of Ascension?’ I’m not sure there is such a contrast. We may be physically separated from each other because of the current epidemic, but, why should we feel less joy than they did? Let me be bold and challenging please. If someone has never felt the joy of the Lord in their Christian life, then it could be that they have not opened their heart and mind to ask God to come and dwell in them. It was the grace of God which opened the disciple’s minds to understand ‘everything written about (Jesus) in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms.’ They had had a lot of preparation, even prior to sharing three years ministry training with Jesus. Now, at the point of the ascension, things were falling into place for them. When a person truly opens their heart and their mind to Jesus, whatever training or lack of knowledge, something wonderful happens: joy enters the void. If we each make ourselves available to God He comes into our own life, and joy is one of the characteristic emotions we feel when He does.

We can live a ‘religious’ life, which looks to some like it is Christian (or any other religion of choice), but, like the beautiful Temple, it might look good on the outside, but, without the Shekinah, it is dead. Without repentance, the building needs to be avoided: it is in quarantine. With repentance and forgiveness, it is cleansed and ready to welcome the Joy of the Lord. In the Ascension, Jesus has charged us to get on with it! Sweep the place, and let his joy come home to us. That is our job as believers blessed by God.

Christ is ascended. Alleluia.
He is ascended indeed. Alleluia.