



**Acts 1.1-11 p.101**  
**Luke 24.44-53 p.77**  
**12th May 2024 Ascension Sunday**

**Big Shoes to fill**

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Minister: Gracious God  
**All: May your Living Word  
come to us afresh this morning**

Minister: So, touch, we pray our minds and hearts  
with your grace and truth  
**All: Through Christ our Lord  
and in the power of your Spirit. Amen**

We used to live almost opposite The Church of The Ascension in Malvern, indeed one of our sons attended the playgroup there.

It was of arts and craft design and was built in 1903 being entirely paid for by Louisa Livingstone in memory of her Archdeacon husband. Those were the days!!

I'm intrigued with a footnote in their history that as a neighbouring parish had already saved up some money to build the church, money no longer needed because of Louisa's generosity, they used it instead to build the church hall alongside. The very hall where our youngest son went to playgroup.

And if Ascension means anything, it's surely about the activity of the disciples after they had seen Jesus go from them. Now he was gone they had to get on with the job. And, as we all know, most of the 'work' of any church goes on in its hall rather than its sanctuary. So, perhaps it was appropriate that their saved-up funds ended up building a hall for the Church of the Ascension, which over a hundred years later still carries on with the work commissioned by our Lord.

Ascension doesn't figure in most of the gospels, but it struck a chord with Luke, so much so that he mentions it twice: at the end of his first book, the gospel that bears his name, and at the beginning of the second, the book of Acts.

It's dated as 40 days from resurrection. However, the number 40 in Jewish maths normally just means *a long time*.

Theologians may struggle to get to grips with The Ascension, yet artists just love playing with it. In 1958 Salvador Dali painted it and what we see is really just the

feet of Jesus, as he ascends into a yellow background that is said to represent either the interior of an atom or sunflower.

A much loved, and much older depiction, is by the Renaissance German artist, Albrecht Durer. Many people value his Praying Hands woodcut, but this one is very moving too. Because amid all the intricate detail of his Ascension portrait completed in 1510, Durer has a quicky twist. Like many who have depicted Ascension in the context of a medieval three decker understanding of the universe, he has Jesus *lifting off* as it were from a plinth. And he leaves behind his footprints. It's a wonderful small detail, these lonely looking footprints, yet, perhaps, it has a big message. It's as if Durer is emphasising that Jesus has been here, he's left his mark upon the earth.

And maybe the message is we, his contemporary followers, have big shoes to fill as we continue to walk his way and continue his ministry of love and compassion.

Now maybe it isn't surprising that the other gospel writers bypass Ascension. For their world had changed so much because of the events, one after the other, during Holy Week and then on Easter Sunday. To add yet another, just a month on, may have felt like one too many. It's like the idea that sometimes it feels as if we live in a different place, even though we haven't moved, because so much has changed around us. A death, an accident, a break down or a breakup. Our world can change even if our address doesn't.

And, in the world of these 1<sup>st</sup> century disciples there had been compound changes that incorporated Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day, and now Ascension Thursday. If not for Luke, then for Mathew, Mark and John it all seems somewhat overwhelming.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Jesus is still teaching them by giving them a running commentary not only on what is happening, but why. Just moments before he departs, he is still explaining the scriptures to them. And all of this is after those bonus forty days between resurrection and ascension when so much seems to have been unpacked and clarified. Obviously living in *real time* through tumultuous events is always a challenge. All of us need time to process moments of trauma and change, and the disciples were no exception.

Yet time, it appears wasn't on their side. For although many leaders and founding fathers may outstay their welcome and linger longer than is necessary, Jesus had the briefest of ministries. We think it was no longer than three years which is less than a term of office for either a British Prime Minister or an American President. And the Ascension is the marker at the end of that brief time with his disciples. This was the day, or

maybe it was the one ten days on at Pentecost, when the baton was handed on. It's the reason why Luke wrote two books to his friend Theophilus, whose name means a *lover of God*. The first was about the life of Jesus, the second about the ministry of his followers. Parts one and two of the Jesus' story. And it's the Ascension which forms the segway between them.

In Acts, anticipating Pentecost, Luke has Jesus name it as the gifting of the Holy Spirit. How does he put it: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and throughout Judea and Samaria*. Luke is a little more enigmatic in his gospel with the departing Jesus saying: *I am sending on you the gift promised by my father, wait here in the city until you are armed with power from above*.

One bible commentator reflects on the final words about *power from above*, and she concludes that what the like of Peter and Andrew, James and John needed more than anything else at that moment immediately after Ascension was what she calls *staying power*. And I think she was right. For this was that tricky moment when the leader is gone and no one quite knows how to write the next chapter.

And yet, for all the anxiety before the Ascension and the need for hands still to be held and explanations given, there seems to have been a change of spirit immediately after it. The departure of Jesus energises rather than deflates his followers and Luke says: *And they returned to Jerusalem full of joy and spent all their time in the temple praising God*.

But they were, undoubtedly, now more than ever in need of this staying power. Just a decade on from the Ascension, James, the brother of John, was beheaded by King Herod Agrippa 1 in AD44 in his persecution of the early church, the year when he also imprisoned Peter. It's thought that James' remains were later taken to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela in Spain, now at the end of that long walk by pilgrims who take the way of St James.

Jesus was not a leader who stayed over long, yet history does record his early followers as people full of courage and conviction who faithfully sought to fill his shoes.

And, just maybe, there is another clue left for us in this story of Ascension, that disciples like James were beginning to fit the jigsaw pieces together, they were starting to understand who Jesus was and that the essential nature of his mission was service.

And that's because of the location of Ascension. The Mount of Olives.

Cast your mind back just a month and half before to Palm Sunday. Jesus starts his entry into Jerusalem from Bethany, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. As with so much of the Holy Week drama the location was significant. In Zechariah 14 it was prophesied that the Coming One would enter Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and bring about liberation. So, everything seemed so right on Palm Sunday, the bits were falling into place. No wonder it felt like Carnival.

Yet at Ascension everything seemed so wrong, at least at first.

For in the Zechariah prophesy the Coming One would leave from the Mount of Olives and conquer Jerusalem. But now Jesus was returning to the Mount after dying on a cross. This wasn't the way it should have ended, surely? This was all the wrong way round – or was it?

Perhaps this is why it's mentioned so often that, right up to the end, Jesus was continuing to teach them about who he was and what his mission was all about. His was the power of love, of compassionate justice and faithful kindness. Cross shaped service. The sort offered up by James just ten years on.

And so, we are told, as he blessed them he left them, leaving his footprints in the soil.

I came across this little piece whilst preparing for today, seems appropriate to end with it. After that commentator I mentioned earlier on pondered this mystery we call The Ascension, she penned a sort of blessing, a prayer of dismissal we all need to hear as we, like Peter and James, seek to fill the shoes of Jesus:

*Friends, how good and pleasant it is to be together, in person or in spirit, encouraging and consoling, provoking and inspiring. But now the service is ended. Now the wider service begins. Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? Go in peace — into the world, for the love of the world!"*

May it be so, in the name of our risen and ascended Lord. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 10th May 2024*