

SERMON REFLECTION Easter 7: Acts 1:6-14



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This past Thursday there was quite a gathering at Gordon Chapel in Fochabers. Some of you know you were there. We had organ music, sang hymns, rejoiced and prayed and a sermon by no less than the Bishop of Moray Ross and Caithness and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal church. We certainly marked Ascension Day. Ascension Day isn't always celebrated in such style but it is a big deal. Throughout the history of the church, the Ascension of Jesus has been considered a major day in the Christian calendar. It's the day that brings everything full circle. God came down to earth in Jesus, the Incarnation, and then Crucifixion, Death, Burial, Resurrection and now Ascension to Heaven. It's a day that not only explains why there is no body of Jesus left on earth, but a day that also testifies to and illumines who Jesus is. Importantly it also passes on the responsibility for Christ's mission to the disciples, to the early embryo church and to us here and now; the responsibility we have to carry on with the work that Christ had begun. Jesus sets the agenda for the future of the church. Jesus' immediate juxtaposition of Kingdom and Witness tells us Jesus wants both. The kingdom is advanced throughout the book of Acts by ordinary people bearing witness to the risen Christ. The only way you can promote the Kingdom is to witness about it, and the only way you can witness is by the power of the Spirit. These nearly disciples were about to enter 'Kingdom conflict' and they didn't have the power to oppose the Kingdoms of this world any more than we do. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; **and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" The same applies today.

There is a real sense in which Jesus' resurrection and his ascension are two parts of one glorious act; he rose from the dead and he kept rising into heaven. In the account in Acts there were 40 days between the two risings in which Jesus took care of some crucial business. On the 40th day, the disciples asked him, "Lord, are you about to restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6) They were asking if finally, their land would be returned to them; if finally, their lives would be secure, if Jesus was finally going to drive the Romans out and put the religious authorities and those who were powerful in their rightful places. Jesus told those disciples that it was not for them to know such things. However, he did say to them that they had a mission to do: **to witness throughout the world to what they had seen and heard through Jesus.**

The disciples found themselves in a difficult transition when Jesus left them to carry on his work without him. The interesting aspect of the story for us today is what happened after Jesus was gone. The words of the angel are a reminder to all of us that we have work to do here on earth. The church today needs people to respond to the challenge of the angels, "Why are you standing here looking up at the sky?"

The Kingdom that Jesus had spoken about all his life was a society on earth where God's will would be as perfectly done as it is in heaven. It is a Kingdom founded on love and not on military power. The Holy Spirit would guide them to make them Christ's witnesses in all the world.

So what about being a witness, what do we mean when we speak of being witnesses? Aren't we supposed to be witnesses of Jesus Christ at all time -- and if necessary, use words?! As Rev Michael reminded us last week, communication is important; how and what we communicate matters. We know there is verbal and non-verbal communication. I thought I'd share this advice about body language. *Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher, was sharing with a class of ministerial students the importance of making the facial expression harmonize with the sermon. "When you speak of heaven," he said, "let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of hell well, then your ordinary face will do!"* (We didn't get any advice like that at SEI.)

A witness is a person who speaks with conviction about an experience in his or her life. If we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, we must speak with conviction about the things that Christ has done in our lives. Being a witness for Christ also means we bring a very specific bias into a situation, a bias that is obvious and I offer another anecdote y way of illustration. *A little boy returned home after his first Sunday School class. His mother asked, "How did it go? Who was your teacher?" The little boy answered, "I don't remember her name, but she must have been Jesus' grandmother because she didn't talk about anyone else."* Whilst it's an amusing story it raises the question do our words give away our relationship with Jesus? Does our bias show through when we are talking to others, as well as in our actions?

Jesus left his disciples and returned to the Father as the Glorified Christ. That means that his disciples were left behind to carry on his work. But Jesus didn't just drop the keys to his filing cabinet on the desk and say "Ok guys it's up to you now." When Christ was lifted up into heaven he renewed his promise to them: (Acts 1:8) 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.' Jesus doesn't just leave us in vacuum, Christ gives us his Spirit. The Spirit of Joy and conviction that Christ is the only way and hope for the world. He left us with the assurance of his presence to carry on his work. Jesus never promised us an easy road, but he promised to be with us, and he prayed for us.

In this morning's Gospel reading from John 17 we find the prayer that Jesus spoke for you and me just before he returned to the Father (before his arrest and crucifixion). He prayed that God would not take us **out** of this world, but that God would be with us **in** the world. That God would give us the strength and wisdom to be His witnesses.

We have the assurance that, when the going gets tough... when there is persecution in our lives... when our witness falls on deaf ears... when our testimony for Christ is responded to with mockery... when people we care for deny and reject the grace and love of God... Christ is with us. He is praying to God on our behalf. We are the people of God, bringing love and forgiveness into a world full of anger, fear and hopelessness. We are a light shining in the darkness. Therefore, it is important that we remind ourselves and each other about who we are. We are God's chosen people. We are God's children. We are ambassadors of Christ in a dark world. We may have our shortcomings, and they may be many. Sometimes we even wonder how Jesus could have considered entrusting such a sacred charge to us but that is just the wonder of God's amazing grace. He inspires us to share the Good News of God's Law, God's love and forgiveness with others.

Ascension Sunday, this Seventh Sunday of the Easter Season, is a day to celebrate the ongoing work of the Risen Christ, to pray without ceasing that the Spirit will empower us for witness, and then to actually go out into the world and bear witness to the Risen Christ, so that the Kingdom may come in all its glory. The angels at the foot of the hill challenge us to be faithful to our calling as Christians. Christ laid the responsibility of passing on the Word of God to others on you and me. When Christ ascended into heaven, he left us with a great responsibility as well as the adventure of a wonderful opportunity.