



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Wait for the Promised Gift

Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

29 May 2022

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Imagine you are walking up a hill in dusty, first-Century Israel. The hill is located just outside Jerusalem and is near a town called Bethany. You have been there often before, but this time, it is different. Totally different.

Today you are walking up there, following a dead man – well, he's not dead, but he was 43 days ago. He is a real, walking, talking, barbecuing man like anyone else you have ever known, but... he was dead 43 days ago. And now, he is alive. You can hear your own breath as it gets a bit laboured climbing the hill, but his is quiet and even. This is no ordinary man.

As he speaks his last earthly words to you, he starts to ascend towards the heavens. Some of your friends are whispering to each other, "I'm not sure about this. It contravenes all the physical laws we have ever experienced, all the experiences of the patriarchs..." But "hold on," you say, "wasn't Elijah taken up? Chariots of fire or something?" And like a dream come to life, Jesus is ascending towards the heavens before your very eyes. Something you had never dreamed of seeing.

"Hold on!" you tell yourself. "Hold on to this moment, because it will never happen again. I must never ever, ever forget this." So your eyes are straining to keep that last, final sight of Jesus and it's forever engraved on your memory.

Jesus' ascension in a resurrected body is unique and many of us here will live to see the 2,000th anniversary of it in about 11 years' time.

What does the ascension mean? For a start, it means that Jesus is in heaven right now, in a resurrected human body. A truly perfect, sinless man can be seen kneeling before the throne of God. One who can sympathise with every challenge, dilemma, weakness or suffering we experience. The highest of High Priests is praying for you and me right now. (Heb 4:15-16)

We have no idea of how immense Father God is.

Imagine again: you are in an ocean-going yacht. As the sails fill and you are drawn by the wind away from the harbour, your heart is anticipating the thrill of venturing into the southern seas beyond New Zealand. But when you come into those Southern seas and the latitude is increasing, so the waves increase. You could easily be looking at a wave coming towards you which is the size of a rugby field and that field of water is tipping up, getting taller and threatening to engulf you.

These waters, and the crash of the mighty waves are like the rustle of the hem of Father God's garment. We have no idea of how great his power and how immense he is. We often shrink him to try and grasp who he is. Someone I know once saw a plastic model of Jesus like an action man doll. It sported "moveable arms and glide action"!!! No wonder we are forbidden to make graven images of God!

Let us keep asking that God give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, as Paul urged the Ephesian church, so that we may know him better, both in intimacy, and in awe of who He truly is. Let's put aside the doubts that try to creep in. There were disciples who saw the Ascension and doubted, but they worked through it and put the doubts aside.

We need revelation to grasp, even in a small way, the majesty and authority of Jesus which was given to him at his Ascension. Revelation 1 and 4 reveal Jesus enthroned with the Father. The Ascension enabled the lamb who was slain to be seated with Father God on the throne and receive the same worship. St Stephen's final vision as he died was of Jesus, at the Father's side, in holy majesty.

Like children, we often focus only on what we think is relevant to us and interpret situations by what we have already understood. We look at new things but we have glasses on our faces through which we see things. The glasses represent what we have already learned from life, from our parents, from other influences like friends or the internet.

Let's look at Acts 1:4 to see how this played out in the disciples' minds. Jesus in his resurrected body is having a meal with them. He is giving them important instructions for when he is gone. This is a moment upon which hangs events which will change the course of history and lead to the formation of the world-wide church - if they pay attention and follow Jesus' instructions...(Acts 1:4) "Jesus gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." At this point they must have stopped listening and reached for the pita bread, thinking, "Oh, he's told us before. We know this bit." It sounds as if they almost missed the next words, "John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

IN A FEW DAYS! Submerged, baptised in the Holy Spirit! You would think they would have been agog with excitement, even if they didn't know exactly what that would look like. Luke records that Jesus said, "Wait in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." So here's what they said, "Lord, are you going to establish Israel as a kingdom again, right now?" Maybe they thought that the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit, the "dunamis" of God, would be given to them to overthrow the Roman occupying force. But no, in verse 8, Jesus gives them understanding: they will receive power but they will use it in order to be his witnesses there in the capital city, Jerusalem, but also in expanding influence to every corner of the kingdom of Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Because he was going away, that is, ascending, he gave the disciples both specific instructions and responsibility to continue his work, empowered by the Holy Spirit's "dunamis". The Greek word "dunamis" is linked to the word "dynamite". Imagine a stick of dynamite. It is sitting by itself jammed under a rock. It could blow that rock sky high or smash it to smithereens. The "dunamis" is potential power. All of us who belong to Jesus have the Holy Spirit, but we need a spark to transform the potential power into actual energy to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

Let's use the next week to pray and ask the Lord not only to give us more of the "dunamis" of the Holy Spirit, but to ignite us and use us to make an impact for good here in our everyday lives in the Hibiscus Coast.

Wait for the promised gift. That is Jesus' instruction to the disciples and to us now. In a week's time, we will celebrate the birthday of the church, the feast of Pentecost. Every birthday needs gifts, so in the coming week let's praying and ask the Lord to pour out the gift of his "dunamis" power on us. Because Jesus is ascended and is with the Father, the mission has been delegated to us!

The empowerment of the Holy Spirit is great, because we all get to play. There are no favourites; we all have a part to play; but for some, it may not be easy. Jesus sent his disciples to be witnesses in Jerusalem, where they were in home territory. Some challenges there, but they knew what to expect. But then he mentioned Samaria, where the locals knew about Jews and hated them. Mind you, Jesus had softened the ground by talking to the woman at the well, who turned out to be a very influential witness. Then the disciples were

sent way beyond, to the entire world. In the rest of the world, they would have no comfort zones, they would leave all familiar things behind. But the promise of Jesus as he sends people is, "I am with you ALWAYS, even to the end of the world." He is with us by his Spirit.

Now as we close, let me summarise, why does the Ascension matter? It matters because it was the start of the new phase of God's plan for the rest of history. Jesus' mission to earth was limited by being one man in one area of the world. Now, he would send the Holy Spirit to empower his disciples to reach the whole world. While Jesus does important work before the throne of the Father, interceding for us, we, as the world-wide church, are given the Holy Spirit, who is not limited to one body. He empowers, guides and teaches us on earth. This is the good plan of God to reach the whole world with the good news.

I challenge you to pray a short prayer, every day for the next week, "Lord, please baptise me with your Holy Spirit and pour out your power in and through us as a church. Use us, Lord, to accomplish your purposes in the world." Baptise us, fill us and use us. Amen.