**13th May 2018**

**Focus Scripture: Acts 1:1-11; John 15.26-16.15**

A school teacher once asked her class if they knew where Jesus lives. One precocious six year old raised his hand and confidently answers ‘Jesus lives in my bathroom Miss’.

‘Really – why do you say that Jesus lives in your bathroom’ inquired the teacher.

‘Because every morning my dad pounds on he door and shouts ‘Good lord are you still in there!’

The ascension of Jesus sees him leave the earth. He is not here in physical form, anymore. Yet he promises to the disciples that he leaves behind that he will always be with them by his Spirit and that they will continue his works and be his witnesses to the end of the world.

In the film Nanny McPheee with Emma Thompson and Colin Firth, Nanny McPhee is employed to look after some badly behaved children. Obviously they don’t like her at first and scheme to get rid of her. She’s on to them very quickly and one of the first things she says to them is: ‘when you need me but you don’t want me, then I have to stay. When you want me but don’t need me, then I won’t be there for you’.

The parallel is not exact with Jesus for we believe he is always here for us. Imagine how the disciples must have felt when they knew he had to leave them ‘when they wanted him but didn’t need him’.

The ascension of Jesus is a bit of a handover. It’s like the son who has been working in his father’s business and one day the father comes to the store and says ‘son, I’m not going to be coming in as much anymore; you can handle things here.’ It was a day the son knew was coming, but could he handle it? Could he keep up the things that his father had begun?

Here, Jesus is making the handover to the disciples. This was the critical moment if the disciples were to fulfil Jesus plan. The disciples understood that if the work of Jesus was to go on, it would be up to them to do it. The body of Christ on earth was no, longer Jesus physical body, but the corporate body of believers. This remains true for us today.

For those early Christians, as they undertook the mission to continue to spread the good news about Jesus, to continue his work for love, forgiveness and justice, there must have been many times when they felt at their wits end and overwhelmed by the challenges at hand. In those times, it must have been a great comfort to remind themselves that they knew –and were known by – the one sitting at the right hand of God. And so it is for us.

There’s this wonderful promise on Ascension Day, that we will see the Lord again. Either when we die or when he comes again. Not so much a goodbye, more an au revoir - - until we see again. When you’ve said goodbye to someone, especially at those sad moments of life, death and bereavement – hold on to that hope: we will see you again with the Lord.

The great commission to be the witnesses of Jesus to the ends of the earth is a real vote of confidence in us. At the minsters conference last week one speaker shared the story of how Jesus returned to heaven after His time on earth. He returned bearing the marks of his earthly pilgrimage with its cruel cross and shameful death.

The angel Gabriel approached him and said ‘master, you must have suffered terribly for people down there.’

‘I did’, said Jesus.

And, continued Gabriel, ‘do they know know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?’

‘Oh no’, said Jesus. ‘Not yet. Right now only a handful of people in Palestine know’.

Gabriel was perplexed. ‘Then what have you done to let all people know about your love for them?’

‘Well, I’ve asked Peter James and John and a few others to tell people about me. Those who are told will in turn tell others, and the gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of humankind will hear about me and what I have done on their behalf’.

Gabriel frowned and looked sceptical. He knew that people weren’t dependable. ‘Yes’ he said. ‘But what if Peter and James and John grow weary? What if the people who come after them forget? And what if way down in the twenty first century people get too busy or too embarrassed to bother telling others about you. Haven’t you made any other plans?’

‘There’s no plan B, Gabriel.’ Jesus answered. ‘I’m counting on them’.

It is said that the Christian faith is only one generation away from extinction. That’s because with each generation comes the renewed responsibility to take the good news of the gospel to the world. It is pretty awesome and at times a crushing responsibility.

At times I despair about the state of the church and the task we face. Everything seems to be against us. I wish Jesus had said - go and build a church – something that’s achievable. Not this open ended commission – go and be my witnesses and make disciples. I wonder whether the next generation will become disciples. I wonder who will make the sacrifices to ensure the witness to Christ continues. And I feel very helpless.

If the disciples were to undertake this mission what were they to do? What help could they receive?

Jesus had promised them help. He promises us help. It’s not all down to us. Thank God. And in these three Sundays around Pentecost I’m going to briefly explore the work of the Holy Spirit.

On the Ascension Day Jesus promised his disciples that they would be filled with power of the Holy Spirit but they had to wait.

Waiting is not our strong suit. In our fast food, high speed ‘don’t just sit there, do something’ age, waiting is not something we do well. Waiting is too passive; we prefer to be active, taking charge. Waiting is the acknowledgement that we are not in control. William Willimon says ‘our waiting implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort. Some other empowerment is needed’.

The disciples knew that without some help- they could not undertake the task of being Christ’s witnesses. So they waited for power to come. But their waiting was not empty time. It was filled with prayer. Some may argue that they could have spent their time more productively. They could have taken charge – planning, organising and getting things in order. Instead they prayed. For the disciples at that critical moment, prayer was the only use of their time... it served as a reminder of God’s presence and power in their lives. Prayer was a reminder that it was God’s will, not their own, which they were seeking. Which is a lesson we all need to learn. How often do we set out on some well-intentioned project without first getting our proper bearings?

Jesus promises help. In John’s gospel chapter 16 Jesus uses the Greek word parakletos to describe the work of the Holy Spirit. The word could be translated into English as the Comforter, the counsellor, the helper, or the advocate.

In our version it is ‘advocate’. An advocate stands up in court of law and explains to the judge or jury how things are from his or her client’s point of view. The advocate pleads the case.

The Holy Spirit is like a friend, standing alongside us, supporting us, and guiding us.

Not a day goes by when I’m not sending up a prayer saying Lord, help me with this. What should I say? How should I act? What should I decide? Then I have to try and be open to the prompting of the Spirit. He may speak through another person, through reading a passage from the bible, or give you a mental picture or word, or an inner feeling or conviction. It takes practice and sometimes advice from more experienced friends, more often than I get it wrong and misread the prompting of the Spirit. But this is the promise of Jesus to give us the helper, the advocate, the counsellor.

Not so long ago I was having a difficult phone conversation with someone. Debbie was a whispering into my ear some wise words and thoughtful suggestions. One of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is reminding the faithful of the truth, jogging the memories of Jesus about all of his commandments so that they can keep them in love.

Think of the Holy Spirit in this way, as a quiet, whispering teacher of the commandments of Jesus. Often the Spirit is advertised in flashier terms: The Spirit gives ecstasy; the Spirit evokes speaking in unknown tongues; the Spirit prompts dramatic and miraculous healings. Indeed, the Holy Spirit of God does perform such deeds, but these are all derivative of the one, primary activity of the Spirit -- reminding the children of God about everything that Jesus taught and commanded (John 14:26), whispering the gospel lyrics into the ears of the forgetful faithful.

He convicts. If we are praying for friends and family to come to faith, maybe you have joined the Novena Thy kingdom Come prayer initiative in this time between Ascension and Pentecost to pray for 5 people to come to know the Lord - – pray for the Holy Spirit to do his work – to open hearts, to give people a desire to seek after God, to be open to the truth of the gospel. We can’t do this. It is the work of the Spirit of truth.

It is not in our power. It is his power. Jesus says I will give you power. We don’t have the power. It’s not down to just us. We are witnesses- we have something to do – but we need power, that does not come from us.

In this passage Jesus talks about baptising his followers in the Holy Spirit and that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them to be his witnesses.

The Greek word baptizo was used in pre Christian Greek. It meant to immerse and was used literally of scuppering a ship, sinking in the mud, and in the passive ‘to perish’, ‘to be overwhelmed’.

Pentecostalists and Charismatic’s have of course argued for a second experience, or blessing of the Holy Spirit. They have invariably called this the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They usually see the ability to speak in tongues as evidence of this. For me I think this is an inaccurate use of biblical terms and can confuse people and can contribute to division among the one people of the Spirit.

I well remember being at university and mixing with all sorts of young Christians from all sorts of backgrounds. Some from the Pentecostal side where urging me to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. I prayed desperately for God to do this but to no avail. Looking back I knew my motives for having such an experience were flawed – it was about keeping up appearances and trying to be seen as super spiritual.

In Acts 5.32 there is a very suggestive saying. That verse speaks of the Spirit ‘whom God has given to those who obey him’. This has in it the great truth that the measure of the spirit which a person can possess is conditioned by the kind of person they are. It means that the person who is honestly and humbly trying to do the will of God will experience more and more of the wonder of the Spirit. It means the living of the Christian life brings with it its own power.

But there is a reality behind our awkward use of expressions such as baptised with the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit. It is tragic that many Christians have robbed themselves of blessing because they have distrusted, feared or despised the Pentecostal and charismatic movement. We can be satisfied with a low level of spirituality. We can prevent God from releasing us in prayer and praise and personal relationships; releasing us from the imprisonment of age long inhibitions and prejudices, We can get into the low expectations of not expecting to see God at work in conversions, in changing tough lives, in healing, in explicit guidance. We can be content to stay in lukewarm waters terrified to launch out into the deep experience of God when we pray the prayer ‘Come Holy Spirit’.

In her book Tramp for the Lord, Corrie Ten Boom tells about an experience she had during her travels after World War II. During the war she was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck. There in that camp her sister died in the gas ovens. After the war was over she became an evangelist telling people about God’s powerful forgiving love.

On one such occasion she was in Germany and after the sermon she greeted many people who were in the audience. A man came forward to shake her hand. Suddenly for Corri Ten Boom there was a flash of recognition as she identified him as one of the prison guards who had stood watch at the doors to the ovens were so many people including her sister were killed. Memories of that terrible time came flooding over her. The pain, the suffering, the grief.

This is what she wrote: ‘I fumbled in my pocket rather than take his hand. My blood seemed to freeze. I knew I had to forgive if I wanted to receive God’s forgiveness, still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart’. She began to pray. She knew that she could not find the power to forgive, but she could at least raise her hand. Slowly she took his hand and when she did a rush of genuine forgiveness came over her. She said to him ‘I forgive you brother’. As she tells it ‘for a long moment we grasped each other’s hand, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, but did not have the power’.

How did she do that? What was the source of the power that enabled her to shake the hand and to forgive her former enemy? Of course it was the Holy Spirit working within her.

Is our experience of the Spirit a plunging under the waters of the spirit, an inundation of God, a vitality produced by him that could cause folk to wonder if we were drunk? Have we that power in prayer, that strength over temptation, that growing Christ likeness, which marked the communities of Christ in the New Testament and of which the one baptism was the outward bond.

The early reformers spoke of improving on their baptism, by which they meant ensuring that they had the reality as well as the symbol. It is to this full surrender to the Lord who is the Spirit, this openness to his sweeping through our lives that is associated with the baptism in the Spirit and the power of the Spirit. We look further at this next week when we celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**Opening prayer**

In his final hours, Jesus prayed

for those who would follow him saying,

“All mine are yours,

and yours are mine;

and I have been glorified in them.”

May the heart of Jesus beat on in us,

the beloved community of witnesses,

as we devote ourselves

to this moment of worship.

Amen.

**Prayer of confession**

People, why do

you stand looking up to the sky? Jesus has been

taken from you and Jesus will come again in and

through you.

When we focus on the acts of faith in our past

and neglect our living witness,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

When we become complacent or lazy

relying on shallow adrenaline for inspiration,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

When we fail to share the dream of Jesus

and rest in the comfort of our own salvation,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

**Words of assurance**

Jesus said, “And now I am no longer in the world,

but they are in the world.”

May we be in the world,

fully engaged in this time and place

as a community of witness.

And the Spirit of Jesus will be with us

protecting us,

making us one,

alive in us.

Christ is risen!

**Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Joining with all who seek love,

we give witness to the Great Love

that pulses through creation.

Filled with the Spirit of Christ,

we have no reason to look upward,

for we are empowered to bring

healing, justice, and shalom.

May this be our witness.

**We go to be Christ ones alive in this world.**

*(speak names together).*

**Opening Prayer**

Almighty God,

We come today reminded of your greatness and glory,

your sovereign power and eternal purpose

all expressed so wonderfully in Jesus Christ, our Lord:

Risen and Ascended.

We thank you for the wonder of Ascension,

that marvellous yet mysterious moment

in the life of the Apostles

which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion

yet departing in joy.

We thank you for the way that it brought the earthly ministry of Jesus

to a fitting conclusion;

signifying his oneness with you,

and demonstrating your final seal of approval

on all that he had done.

We thank you that through his Ascension

Jesus is now set free to be Lord of all:

no longer bound to a particular place or time,

but with us always - able to reach even to the ends of the earth.

We thank you that through his departing

Jesus prepared for his coming again:

through his Spirit,

his Church,

and his coming again in glory.

Gracious God,

Forgive us for so often failing

to grasp the wonder of Ascension,

for living each day as though it had never been.

Forgive the smallness of our vision,

the narrowness of our outlook,

the weakness of our love,

the nervousness of our witness,

our repeated failure to recognize

the fullness of your revelation in Christ.

Give us a deeper sense of wonder,

a stronger faith,

and a greater understanding of all you have done.

Father God, Like the Apostles,

we too will never fully understand

all Ascension means.

We accept, but we do not fully understand.

We believe, yet we have many questions.

Help us, despite our uncertainty,

to hold firm to the great truth

that the wonder of Christ Jesus goes far beyond

anything we can ever imagine,

and in that faith may we live each day

to his glory and honour: **AMEN**

**Prayers Of Intercession**

You are free, Lord,

your Ascension has set you free:

free from the constraints of human existence,

outside the limitations of time and space;

free to be here with us now,

in our worship and fellowship;

and free to be with us always;

for in your freedom

you have bound yourself to us with a promise:

**“Lo! I am with you always**

**even to the very end of time.”**

We pray, Lord, for those

who need to feel you close,

who need the assurance of your love,

the encouragement of your Spirit. [Silence]

We pray for those who are persecuted,

who are discriminated against,

who are mocked because of their faith or race or colour. [Silence]

We pray for those who are imprisoned,

who are tortured,

who are exiled,

because they have fought, struggled and spoken out

for the rights of their people. [Silence]

We pray for those who are destitute,

who are hungry,

who are refugees,

because of the selfishness and apathy of the world. [Silence]

We pray for those who are filled with guilt,

who are broken-hearted, who are perplexed,

because a relationship has gone wrong. [Silence]

We pray for those who are feeling fed up,

who are in discomfort,

who are afraid, because they are ill

in body, mind or spirit. [Silence]

We pray for those who are numbed,

who are angry who are desolate

because they have been bereaved. [Silence]

We pray for those caught up in war,

and violence, and hatred;

especially the innocent victims of these evils. [Silence]

We pray at this time of financial turmoil,

for those who have lost jobs,

those who struggle to pay bills,

and those who have the power to affect positive change. [Silence]

Be with us all, Lord:

in all our daily struggles

as we seek to follow you.

Be with us all, Lord:

in our periods of doubt and despair;

and in our times of happiness, health and loving.

Be with us all, Lord:

until that time when in your in your Kingdom of Love

our joy will know no end: **AMEN**