

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 24th MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

Today we watch with the disciples as Jesus is taken bodily into heaven. What does it mean? Well, it certainly doesn't mean that Jesus has abandoned us! Quite the opposite: he leaves so that the gift of God's Holy Spirit can come, and God can be even closer to us than Jesus was to his closest friends.

At the beginning of this service, pause for a moment to collect your thoughts. Does God feel near, or far away? His promise is to be with us – forever! And we know He can be trusted to keep His promise.

And we remind ourselves that, though apart, we are still part of the body of Christ.



The Ascension of Jesus Christ, in Neamt Monastery, Rome. © nickpit/Shutterstock.com

Christ has broken down the dividing wall which made us strangers one to another. He has made us one humanity, so that God might be all in all. He is our life, our hope, our peace.

REMINING OURSELVES OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Lord, we invite you into this our church.

Lord, we invite you into our minds.

Lord, we invite you into our hearts.

Move in us through your Spirit.

Speak to us, your children, young and old.

Help us to love you more today. Amen

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Your name is above every name;
yet we so often put our trust in money and power.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

You turn our hearts towards the world;
yet we turn away from its suffering.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You call us to be your broken body;
yet we struggle to share the gift of forgiveness.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

A COLLECT FOR ASCENSION

God who cannot be held by word or wall,
power of love beyond all earthly powers;
lift our eyes to see your glory in the stuff of our everyday lives,
and your radiance in the faces of all those we meet;
make us ready for Your Spirit of transforming fire;
and turn our hearts to the mending of the world;
through Jesus Christ, the Name above all names. **Amen.**

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Acts 1:6-14)

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they

went to the room upstairs where they were staying ... and they were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Thanks be to God.

SONG

**A new commandment I give unto you
That you love one another as I have loved you,
That you love one another as I have loved you.
*By this shall all men know you are My disciples
If you have love one for another (Repeat).***

GOSPEL READING (John 17:1-6,11)

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.... And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION

Pity Jesus' disciples! What an emotional roller-coaster of a ride the past few weeks had been for them! First the triumph of Palm Sunday, with Jesus being acclaimed by the crowds. Then watching the wheels coming off as the authorities, already hostile, had arrested him under cover of dark, tried



him in a kangaroo court and had the Romans do the dirty work of putting him to an agonising and humiliating death. The disciples' own horror at Jesus' death, their fear for their own lives and guilt for having abandoned him to his fate. Then the rumours that Jesus was alive again, and – amazingly! – there he was, more alive than ever. A kind of 'new normal' emerging as they enjoyed days in the sun with Jesus: no talk of suffering or death now.

And then he is gone again, taken into heaven before their eyes, this time with no promise of a happy reunion anytime soon. Instead, he leaves them with a strange promise about some mysterious helper on the way: can't make any sense of that! Oh, and the small matter of a job to do – nothing less than to tell their story throughout the whole sceptical world. This promised helper had better be good at his job!

Perhaps right now we can sympathise more than ever with that sense of being on an emotional rollercoaster? From the first few anxious weeks when the Covid story was unfolding, we've watched with horror as the virus spread. Tens of thousands have died, millions have been infected, countless people's livelihoods are in the balance; we've been confined to our homes, unable to meet close family, unable even to mourn the loss of loved ones in the usual way. Our hopes have been lifted, then dropped, repeatedly. Now we are moving from a time of at least some certainty into one of guesswork and "common sense"; only we all know common sense will not be enough. Little wonder that pretty much everyone I talk to is feeling emotionally wrung-out.

And as a Church we feel we want to do more to help – of course we do. But what can we do? How can we as Church continue to reach out amidst all these restrictions? We know that, like those first disciples, we have a mission – the same mission, to make known to the world the love of God in Christ. But how can we be up to the task?

What did those early disciples do faced with their own period of uncertain waiting?

They stuck together, and they prayed.

The climax of Jesus' great prayer in John's Gospel for all his followers is, "that they may be one, heavenly Father, as we are one." Christian unity is for Jesus the best evidence to the world at large of the reality of his message. Let's be clear: Jesus wasn't commending a holy-huddle mentality, but a genuine,

practical care for each other which overflows in care for the wider community and world, and which makes a profound impression on all who see it. Is it ironic to be talking about Christian unity when we can't meet together? Not at all. We are still very much one body: we are just finding new ways of expressing that. As one person said to me, we need to find out how to practise **sociable** distancing.

And prayer. Stephen reflected last week on the importance of using the time we now have as an opportunity to get praying. Earlier in the week I circulated a cycle of prayer which may help you focus your praying. We are looking at starting regular prayer on Zoom. But whether you do it on Zoom, or do it by yourself, the key thing (in the words of the motto of the sports brand, Nike) is: "Just do it!"

Next week we will celebrate Pentecost, when we remember and give thanks for God's gift to the Church of His Spirit – not just once, but in every generation, including ours. The Spirit is given to us to be our helper and guide in the task of following in Jesus' steps, and sharing the good news about him in a world hungering for spiritual reality. If anyone can make sense of these rollercoaster times, and bring us through – changed, maybe humbled, but trusting more in God's grace and strength – if anyone can help us through these upside-down times, it is Him. Our job is to stick together, to love the world, and to pray.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....

[Spend a few moments in quiet, reflecting on what you have heard or read.]



PRAYERS

As the Church of God,
Let us be still, and pray together.

God of glory,
May your light shine in our church community
As you work among us and bless us with your presence;
We offer you the gifts you have given us
And our various ministries;
We offer you ourselves
In the situations in which you have placed us in.

Silence

Holy God;
May we live with your life in us.

God of glory,
May the whole world come to know you
And give you honour and praise.
Help us to stand firm in our faith
and strong in your power.
May your kingdom come and your will be done

Silence

Holy God;
May we live with your life in us.

God of glory,
May our homes, schools, shops, and places of work
Become places where your glory is seen and experienced
In the ordinary things, the everyday routines,
The pots and pans of life.
Fill us to overflowing with thankfulness
Both in the sunlight and in the storm.

Silence

Holy God;
May we live with your life in us.

God of glory,
With your special affection for the discarded and marginalised,
The weak and the vulnerable,
We pray for all those who are finding life an exhausting struggle
Or who long for some respite from pain or depression.
Support them in their troubles, bring healing and reassurance,
And touch them with the gentleness of your peace.

Silence

Holy God;
May we live with your life in us.

God of glory,
Teach us to understand death in the context of your eternity,
So that our fears are calmed as we approach it.
Welcome with merciful love those who have recently died – among them Alan
Renwick and Glenys Goodyear – and those whose anniversaries fall at this time
– John Life, Philip King, Reg & Marjorie Gumery, Naomi Lewis, Hartley Brown,
Ann Jarrett, Johanna Anwyl-Hughes, Wendy Anwyl-Hughes, Jill Scholes and
Hilda Stewart;
And shelter their loved ones in the shadow of your wings.

Silence

Holy God;
May we live with your life in us.

God of glory, we thank you
That through your ascension into heaven
The way was opened for us to receive the Holy Spirit.
Prepare our hearts each day to welcome you.

Merciful Father
**Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer (this version, or the traditional one)

Rejoicing in God's new creation, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

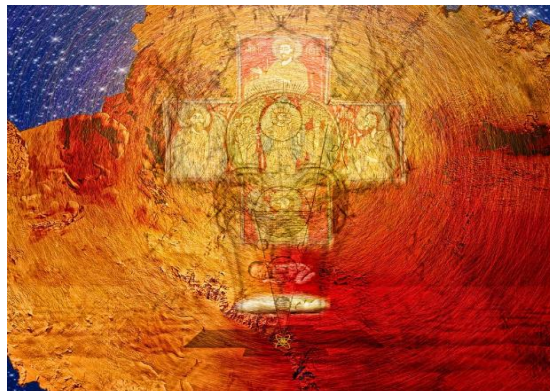
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

ENDING

**Loving God, bring us all to life by the power of your love.
Bring us all to live in the life of your kingdom.
And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
Be with us all evermore. Amen.**

CLOSING SONG

**God be with you till we meet again;
By his counsels guide, uphold you;
With his sheep securely fold you.
God be with you till we meet again.**



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