

**Ascension Day: Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> May**  
**Acts 1:1-1, Ephesians 1:15-end, Luke 24:44-end.**

**“The Great Disappearing Act”**

I feel that history is repeating itself! I was scheduled to preach the day after the terrorist bombings in Paris in November 2015 and had to rethink what I should say at very short notice. This evening we are steel reeling from the tragedy of Manchester earlier this week. Once again I had prepared my sermon for this evening just before that event and I have had to think again how can I relate our celebration of the Ascension to what has happened. That has not been easy.

It is only right and proper that as we come together this evening that we reflect upon those events, pray for those who have suffered loss of life or injury and their families, and stand together with the people of Manchester in their pain.

Tonight we have lit a candle. A flame burns bright in the darkness. The true light will overcome the darkness. We must not lose hope as we pray for understanding and try to come to grips with these awful events.

I was not raised as an Anglican and so the celebration of Ascension Day is not something that I have been used to although I do have vague memories as a young boy at St Andrew’s school, here in Cobham, of being marched to church to sit through what I considered one of the most boring and least understandable services I had ever experienced!

Christmas – okay. I can understand and enter into that. Easter too – after all we are called to be ‘Easter People’ living in the good of Christ’s death and resurrection. Then there is Pentecost. Again I can relate to that. We need the Holy Spirit to live in the way that God has called us to. But Ascension Day – what’s that all about? It seems to me a bit like Jesus’s big disappearing act!

But Jesus did explain to his disciples of his need to leave them. It could only be after that event that the Holy Spirit could come and whereas the life and ministry of Jesus had been restricted to a short time and small geographic area, when the Holy Spirit came, all men (and women) could know and experience His love and power. The Ascension had to happen. Without it there could be no church. No way ahead. No future.

I don’t need to remind you that we are in a time of Vacancy. Our Rector left us at the end of January. How do we feel about that? How did the first disciples feel about Jesus leaving them? It is easy for us with hindsight to know what it meant but they had no concept or understanding of what he said. They simply had to take him at his word and trust him and wait.

So it is for us at St Andrew’s. We may feel bereft, ‘all at sea’ without our Rector but we know that things don’t stand still. God calls us to wait. But not passively. We need to be waiting in active participation. We pray each week the words of the Vacancy prayer. We have regular small prayer meetings in Church Gate House. Our PCC and our Churchwardens have been busy preparing a parish profile and asking for God’s guidance not just as to whom we need but also as to what God has in store for us.

So it was, in a sense, for the first disciples. What happens next must have been the question on their minds. What was this Holy Spirit that Jesus talked about?

This Ascension Day service also marks the beginning period of 'Thy Kingdom Come' in which the Archbishop of Canterbury has called Christians throughout the world, individually and corporately, to take the words of the Lord's Prayer and actively pray for God's Kingdom to come to us and to our communities. There will be opportunities within this church to come for individual or corporate acts of prayer – assisted by the prayer stations creatively set up around the building. We can also join those who will take to the streets to actively prayer walk around Cobham. And then on Saturday week it is hoped that as many as possible will gather together here for an act of prayer and fasting regarding the Vacancy. I believe with all my heart that this will be an important moment. Of course we can pray quietly at home, on our own, but there is something special about coming together corporately, making some sort of sacrifice and committing ourselves to God's will and standing with those who will be making important decisions for this church in the near future.

But we pray not only for our own church and local community. 'Thy Kingdom Come' is a prayer for the world.

The Kingdom did come on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were gathered together in one place but it also continues to come to us today. The agency for the Kingdom is us, as we gather together in what we call church.

But we all know that the earthly church, since its birth at Pentecost, has always been a motley crew. It's never been ideal.

I read this the other day:

“The New Testament church exists because churches, to differing degrees, have always been a mess – a glorious mess of saints still polluted by remaining sin, affected by defective genes, brains, and bodies, and influenced by life-shaping events. This mess rarely looks glorious to us up close. It looks like a lot of sin and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears invested into a lot of futility. It often looks like something we’d rather escape than join.”

The New Testament church was comprised of a group of people who came together not because of their choice but because Jesus chose them. The next generation of early Christians didn’t chose each other either. They too were thrown together with others they likely wouldn’t have chosen. Jews and Gentiles, educated and uneducated, slaves and slave owners, poor and rich, former prostitutes, tax collectors and Pharisees. A motley crew indeed!

And then Jesus gave them (and us) what seem to be impossible commands. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Then, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel, making disciples of all men – and women.”

What impossible tasks are demanded of such an impossible and improbable community.

But here we are, two thousand years later. That “mission impossible” has produced impossible communities carrying out this impossible command

throughout much of the world. For all the church's problems, and they are many, something miraculous is at work here. The Holy Spirit came and is still with us and is at work in the lives of those who open themselves to his will. This is what the Kingdom is all about. It is a visible expression of God's heart of love, of justice, of peace and right thinking in the society in which we live. So as we reflect on 'Thy Kingdom Come' let each one of us embrace God's promised Holy Spirit that the Kingdom might become a reality in us as individuals and corporately as a church.

Let each of us actively embrace our vision "To Know, Glorify & Make Christ Known". Of course we must recognize our weaknesses and shortcomings but let us not get caught up in what we see as the short failings of each other and of our church. Let us not stand on the touch line as we enter a new chapter in the history of our church here in Cobham but let us all stand together in seeking God's will, listening to his voice and acting on his words.

Jesus designed the church to be a place where love comes true, where we lay our preferences aside out of deference to others. It is meant to be 'a living laboratory of love', a place where there are so many opportunities, big and small, to lay down our lives for each other that the love of Christ became a public spectacle just as his death on the cross was two thousand years ago.

How can we respond to such a terrible act of murder as took place in Manchester especially when so many young and innocent lives are involved? For us as Christians, God's Holy Spirit will help guide and shape our response as individuals. What we have seen at Manchester and in so many other places is the complete antithesis of God's heart for this world. We can only pray that

God's Kingdom will come in our troubled world. It is his church that will usher in that Kingdom and so, as we close, I would like us to consider again what God calls us to as his people.

To honour each other.

To contribute to meet each other's needs.

To show hospitality to one another

To rejoice over each other's joys.

To weep over each other's griefs.

To pursue harmony with each other in spite of differences.

Not to exclude the lowliest members.

To submit to each other.

To persistently strive for agreement over thorny issues.

To use our freedom in Christ to serve one another.

To bear with each other's weaknesses, foibles, and immaturity.

To cover each other sins with forgiveness.

To stir each other up to press on in the mission of hope.

But how can we achieve these seemingly impossible commands? It can only be through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who comes to empower us. So, in the wake of the Manchester bombing, and at this time of reflection on 'Thy Kingdom Come' let each one of us open our hearts and minds to the love of God revealed in Jesus and welcome the Holy Spirit who comes to us as gentle as a dove. Let us take a moment now to pause and pray quietly for ourselves, for those whose lives have been changed forever by Monday's events, and for this troubled world. Jesus comes and stands among us and says 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

Amen.