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Sunday 16 May

Theme: Easter 7 (After Ascension)

## Isolation Radio Talk

**There, before you; laughing, weeping, hurting, being with you.**

Good Morning

Of all the festivals we keep to mark the pattern and passage of our Jesus' life, The Ascension is, probably, the least 'earth-bound' but is critical to our understanding of Jesus as the Christ, and what comes next for his followers; past, present and future.

What then is The Ascension about?

Now, this is not really meant to be an English lesson, yet I want you to look at the Ascension as if it were a figure of speech. Do you remember those from school days; I am not thinking about an onomatopoeia - now that would be something to bang on about; I am thinking about metaphor. Yes, that is just how I want you to think about The Ascension; as a metaphor; that is what the Ascension is; a metaphor.

I want you to understand the importance of metaphorical language. Metaphor, is our human ability of image-making, in our attempt to know and express reality. Metaphorical language is essential to our knowledge and understanding, of who we are as humans and to what we become. I say this because it is an aid, in our search for truth, (what ever that may be?). A metaphor appears as the *instinctive* and *necessary* act of our human-mind as it explores our reality and orders our understanding of the experiences we have.

If I were to put it another way, metaphor represents, symbolises an idea, a truth, that cannot be understood or appreciated in any other way because essentially, the essence of a metaphor is the uniqueness by which it is used. For example, as humans, we use our bodily sensations as signs to stand for something else. These signs become symbols, otherwise expressed, they stand for and represent something else. Metaphors do this, they articulate symbols, through clarification and by endless associations and connections of symbols.

Often I suspect, you will as a metaphor, use an expression not connected with the subject. Here is an example. School exams were and will again be much in the news because of COVID-19. If exam days are behind you, you might still remember how you might have said you 'felt you had fallen through a trapdoor into panic' as time ran out to complete the questions; the very idea of a 'trapdoor' is a shorthand way of telling me a great deal about how you were feeling at that moment. It would tell me about the suddenness, the shock of discovering how short is the time left, and it would say something to me about your uncertainty about your capabilities. Reassuringly I would say to you, that you have been well taught; you have been steady in your revision; and your work has been well done. Now is the time to trust what you know and what you have done.

Think of the Ascension in a similar sort of way - as a metaphor for the reality of the removal of Jesus from 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. As you think about the Ascension let it tell you something therefore, not so much about what happened, but what it means. It is a fanciful story about which the gospel writers who mention it are by no means agreed or certain. You all know that endings

can sometimes be difficult; 'got to go now, people to see, things to do'; 'it's time I was going', says a visitor; half an hour later the visitor is still there.

Here they were, the disciples, at the end of what came to be called the Great Forty Days, with these curious accounts of meetings with Jesus and those conversations about 'going away so that the comforter can come'; 'unless I go the Spirit cannot come'. It was a long, long time before they began to understand *what* the Ascension meant; perhaps they thought it would go on being like it was for always: remember we have the pleasure of hindsight, this was all new to them.

No, that is not how life is, is it? You know, I know, that it could not be so. Somehow, the Jesus they knew, the Jesus who was still with them, *that* Jesus had to go away. Looking for a reason, it is not hard for you to say now, that he went away so that he could be known by you today; be known in a world so totally, totally unlike the world of that 1<sup>st</sup> century, post crucifixion, post resurrection world; in as different culture as you can possibly imagine.

One of the reasons I can ask you to think in this way, is that it is difficult to get a grip on what Luke had in mind, when he wrote these first few verses in The Book of Acts. He uses a word (*diistemi*) that means too 'separate from' but that is also connected with an even older Greek, military word (*diastethi*) that means to keep a proper space on parade between one soldier and the next. Some gospel texts add the sentence that 'he was carried up to heaven'. The word that we translate 'carried up' is used elsewhere as a metaphor. In the First Letter of Peter (1 Peter 2.24.) the writer says Jesus 'bore (using the same word - carried up) *our sins [our faults] in his body*'; or in the Letter to the Hebrews (7.27), the writer says '*he has no need to offer (using the same word - carry up) sacrifices day after day*'. Luke then goes on to use another word in his gospel (*epairo*), (6.20 ; 11.27; 24.50) and uses it very much as a metaphor, when he speaks about the *lifting* up of eyes or voice.

What I've been trying to say, as clearly as I can, is that the author of the Acts of the Apostles, writing about The Ascension, does not seem to be describing a literal event, but a scene in which Jesus is separated from his Disciples, by continuing to move away from them, until he had 'gone from their sight'.

Another way, might be to remember the account of Mallory (whose body was found in 1999 after lying near the summit of Everest since 1924) and Irvine. The last sight of them was 'steadily moving upwards'. We still do not know whether they reached the top – I do not suppose we ever shall.

The evidence of the Disciples, and the life of the Church through all the centuries that have followed, knows something about Jesus. They say he *did* reach his destination; wonderfully he has taken *our humanity* into the *heart of God*. Whatever the future holds; whatever journey of life you make; through the whole muddle and bustle of human relationships; in laughter or tears, joy or sorrow, pain or healing, love or hate - Jesus *is* there, before you, laughing with you, weeping with you, hurting with you, being with you. Whether your life is comedy or tragedy, triumph or defeat, Jesus is always there *before* you.

Next week - Pentecost tells you that, not only is he there waiting for you in the future; he is present with you now. But that *is* another story.

Thank you for listening

## Prayer

Let us pray to the one God, Creator, Word and Spirit,  
that our lives may bear witness to our hope.

When we stand gazing upwards,  
bring us down to earth:  
with the love of a friend,  
through the songs of the sorrowing,  
in the faces of the hungry.

When we look to you for action,  
demand some work from us:  
By your touch of fire,  
your glance of reproof,  
your fearful longing.

As ruler over all:  
love us into action,  
fire us with your zeal,  
enrich us with your grace,  
to make us willing subjects of your rule.  
Amen.