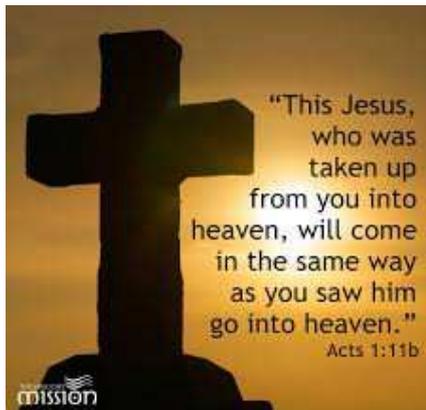


Weekly Newsletter (62)

by and for the Christ Church and Paghams URC families

9th May 2021

Musings from the Manse



Dear Friends,

On Thursday of this week, it will be Ascension Day – something not celebrated too much in Protestant Churches but marked as a most Holy Day in the Catholic Church. When I was studying at Westminster College, Cambridge as part of the Cambridge Theological Federation, we did mark Ascension Day by setting off a firework rocket from the tower of the College! I'm not sure how or why this tradition started and as we also had to dress in our pyjamas and dressing gowns and bring along a teddy bear; it just seemed to be the right thing to do!

That aside, Ascension Day, of course, marks the passage in the Book of Acts, where Jesus is taken up into heaven and the disciples are left looking up into the clouds.

Sheila Walker, in her book of 'Contemporary Reflections' writes about Acts 1: 1-11 in this way....

'Is there anyone up there? No, he was not the first cosmonaut, returning home. And what a relief that no space travellers since have found a trace of God 'up there'; the thought of some divine GCHQ cunningly sited between the stars is worthy only of Roman gods, (like Jupiter and Mars), writers of hitchhikers' guides or under fives; it would have put paid to our belief to find the Creator inside his creation, the author inside the book. Except in the sense that they are, of course, writ large and small on every page for those who have eyes to see; it is as easy to find God in the detail of a daisy as in the immensity of a galaxy – or as hard.

What we believe, though, is caught up in what would seem to be naïve medieval art: a three-tier universe with heaven fixed, heavy with gold leaf, however, many miles above the bright blue skies.

Before we smile our knowing, scientific smiles, however, do we have a better idea?

Jacob's ladder, Elijah's chariot, Jesus ascending, the new Jerusalem 'coming down': scripture, it's clear, simply speaks of heaven 'up there' ... And Jesus raised his eyes to heaven to pray: why? Because he looked up to his Father? Is it all symbolic acting out of the fact that heavenly ways are 'higher'?

Though we talk of Jesus in a physical way as 'seated at the right hand of the Father' (and therefore wonder where that is and how God, who is Spirit, can have a right hand), should we speak of its meaning, of the finished work of Christ, his privileged place to pray for us, his authority to rule – rather than debating what dimension or parallel universe he now inhabits?

For, in all of this, do we not fall into the same error as the disciples and need to hear the angels say to us 'Why do you stand here looking into the sky?' Why speculate on things clouded to our understanding? If we could have understood the words, he would not have given us only pictures and a mandate to share what we have seen, which is enough.

For they did see Jesus ascending - eleven of them with their own eyes - and Luke, meticulous historian, twice shares what they have seen, though can't explain; it is enough – miracles need no precedent and call for faith, not explanation...

Jesus ascending. They knew, then, it was an end; forty days to prove him risen – now they would see their friend, their Lord and God, no more. But it was also a beginning: he would send the Holy Spirit, floating the divine company, so we could all have a share in restoring the kingdom - the kingdom of heaven - not to Israel, but to God.

The kingdom of heaven ... not so much a place – up there, out there, sky high – but a state, an estate, in which Christ is King of every wind of change, of every wave of terror, of every flight of fancy, of every heart's cry; and everywhere his will is done, on earth, as it is in heaven. There – the kingdom of heaven is not up, up and faraway, but around and within, and closer than breathing.

The kingdom of heaven, not so much a place – like the ultimate old people’s home, the rural idyll or swinging city, or even a virtual place like the cosmic address for Friends Reunited – but the transformation, when the wine of the fruit of the Spirit runs in our veins - intoxication of the human with the divine.

The kingdom of heaven, not so much a place to be invited to, (or not), when we die; only if there is something of the kingdom already within us will we find, when everything else is stripped away, that deep cried to deep, the heavenly seed within us grows to fill our field; to be our food and drink, our purpose, our delight, our energy, our rest, our vision and our joy; do not ask then if heaven is up or down.

Heaven is all.'

Whatever we understand or believe about the way Jesus ascended to heaven, it seems to me to be one of those events that we cannot make sense of in a human way; we have to accept it as one of those divine occurrences that we don't need to fully understand. As today's disciples, we may still be waiting for Jesus to appear out of the clouds, but in the meantime, (and to quote one of my favourite worship songs)...

'No guilt in life, no fear in death,
this is the power of Christ in me;
from life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
can ever pluck me from his hand;
till he returns or calls me home,
here in the power of Christ I'll stand!'

Yours in Christ, Helen <>

Word for today John 15: 9-17

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

John 15: 9-12

Meditation of Philip and Thomas

We thought for a minute he was going to give us a list of rules and regulations. After all, that's what we were used to, what we'd grown up with for as long as we could remember. Faith was about doing this, doing that – not just **ten** commandments, but a host of others, decrees for just about every action and eventuality under the sun.

We're not knocking it, for it helped to fashion our nation and, by and large, with the odd aberration, it's kept us on the straight and narrow. But we don't mind admitting that, like many others, we've found it a struggle, both to observe the requirements of the Law and to feel it's got us anywhere - put us right with God.

Was Jesus going to give us a new system, we wondered - a different set of rules?

No, he summed up his way instead in a single sentence - devastatingly simple, yet infinitely challenging:

'This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you.'

Wow, we thought – that sounds easy! But of course, it's not; in his case it meant death on a cross, total self-surrender – that's how costly love can be.

We'll never show anything quite like that but it's the yardstick we measure ourselves by, the goal we aim for, shaping everything we think, and say, and do.

It's what the Law, gospel and God himself is all about, the heart of our faith: love!

Not just a new commandment - but the greatest commandment of all.



