

Ascension Day,

May 21<sup>st</sup> 2020.

Main passage Acts 1:1-11 but also Luke 24:44-end,

And so they stood there. The Lord had gone, ascended. It has been such a roller coaster experience for them the past 6 weeks... pain, confusion, sorrow, frustration, fear, joy, delight, new things discovered, old ones left behind... perhaps feelings you may relate to in these weeks since we last physically met as a community. Departure, yet promises gave.

Luke and Acts can be seen as history books. But unlike the other gospels, we know these books went first to a person – Theophilus – a seeker to understand or a young believer, but certainly a wealthy one who commissioned this work as a patron. It reminds us, this is not Luke recording history as an academic, he has in mind a person and to help him understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

So there are promises to us. The angels had told them he would return - as he had left physically, visibly, he would physically visibly return in a time unknown. He had left relatively privately but when he would return he would be seen by millions and billions. A promise to live by.

Yet a second promise to live by – the promise of the Spirit. In his final words, they are told to go into the world - but first called to wait. It is like they are told to run the race, they line up, they are now told to wait... Later they are to go, he says.

But Jesus said they were to wait in Jerusalem. When he would ascend, he would be exalted to the right hand of God, and he would receive from the Father the Spirit and he would pour the Spirit upon them, (cf Acts 2:33).

Let's focus on Jesus words in Luke 24. They are to be *clothed with power* from him. Jesus ascended in the vicinity of Bethany very close to Jerusalem. When you visit you can go to one of the churches on the two suggested places where he ascended from. For those who follow the Lectio 365 app, this next insight isn't new. Bethany in Aramaic – means house of sorrows or house of dates / figs. We read of figs first in the Garden of Eden. After the Fall, Adam and Eve, they sewed together fig leaves and make coverings for themselves as they realised they were naked. They saw they were naked and they were afraid. The Spirit seeks to clothe the believer. A believer is not be fearful of what is ahead, or even to be ashamed, no need to insecure. Instead to be clothed. In a manner of speaking, he was suggesting, they were spiritually naked, until they were clothed, or perhaps you could say they were in rags until they were clothed in riches?

The word to clothe is used in various places in the NT but consider these: after his trial, Jesus is mocked, the scarlet robe taken off and he was clothed with his own clothes... He was clothed by others for you – now he seeks to clothe you with his Spirit.

Luke 15 – the Father said to his slaves, quickly bring out the best robe and clothe him with it, and put a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet. Grace – he didn't deserve to be welcomed home and restored, he didn't deserve to receive the robe sandals ring. Grace – wonderful grace – our redemption is a gift of grace, the

gift of the Spirit – grace – we didn't deserve to have the Lord come to live within us. The best robe. The Lord God himself – not something else – comes within.

Upon the return of Christ 'the perishable will have been clothed with the imperishable, and this mortal will have been clothed with immortality, then will come the saying that is written 'Death is swallowed up in victory'. Such an image – what does that make us think – the same the Lord seeks to clothe believers with his Spirit.

Revelation. The ascended Lord. In the middle of the lampstands I saw one like the son of man – clothed in a robe reaching to the feet and a golden sash across his chest. The One who stands among the Church – lampstands represent that John tells us – the One who offers a gift, to give the Spirit to his Church in all its fullness.

What you are clothed with matters – that has been one of the messages of this Corona pandemic. What we wear matters. What you are clothed with, Jesus tells his followers, matters.

So what could they have understand from the promise of the Spirit to them. Who are they to be clothed with?

The first idea may have been Creation.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1).

The Spirit was involved in creation. What we read in the rest of Genesis 1, we see his powerful creative work. The Spirit who brings life out of nothing. Where nothing is going on, the Spirit can bring life. Jesus later talked of new creation: "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3).

The Spirit brings new life. Born again - to be a Christian - needs the Spirit's work. The Spirit who brings creation, he brings new creation in people, the One who brings eternal life from spiritual darkness. The One needed for that to happen.

The Spirit who brings life out of nothing, order out of chaos, beauty out of disorder, new life in all sorts of ways.

*The apostles that day were well aware of the varied of ways the Spirit worked in the past. For example, for leadership. Gideon, as a judge, and David as a king, for leadership. David is often seen as the man of men. The man you'd expect. But Gideon, a man hiding in a winepress for fear of his enemies, who asks a number of times, not just for the fleece, to be sure. A man lacking great confidence. Not the war time leader you'd expect. Yet the Spirit is given to him.*

Spirit given for strength – Samson; yet when we read later of Paul and what he went through, or the apostles in the first months after Pentecost when there is a mix of great things happening and threats from religious leadership. Was that strength to carry on, to keep on, despite the demands and pressures.

Prophets like Isaiah who declared the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. Maybe the closest of the maybe what the Lord was asking of his apostles - to preach good news, to proclaim the Lord's favour, to hear the Lord's direction, to set the captives free.

The Spirit given, even if people lacked confidence, strength for the tasks asked of them, the spiritual tools and help to do what the Lord had commanded.

But it was particular people, that man or woman in that time, for that task. Here before ascension, Jesus had said, *you* will be baptised, *you* be clothed. Who is you. All of them. They are all told to wait. Not, the 11. Not the three - Peter, James, John. Not the one, - Peter, the rock on whom the Lord would build his church. All are to wait, all are to be clothed. And all did wait, those 10 days, men and women, in prayer - the apostles, Mary Jesus mother, his previously unbelieving siblings, and it is suggested 120 in total, waited. All to be clothed.

Over the years ahead, from writings and from what we see in Acts, they model to us and teach us more about what the Spirit does and who He is, the one they waited for and received.

The Spirit makes them more effective in witness and ministry; gives power for victory over sin in their lives; power for victory over Satan and demons. Gifts are given - natural and supernatural - for ministry. Power is given to work miracles - for the word used by Jesus for "power" - is also the word later used to describe miracles that are done by them in Jesus name.

Promise of his return, promise of the Spirit, Theophilus heard, and the promise in Luke's first words: an eye catcher 'In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up.' **Began.** Jesus will return to act and to do the plan of the Father. Inbetween the ascension and his parousia, he continues to do and act. One of those ways: through his Spirit he would wants to clothe them and us with. For Theophilus, Jesus ascending was not the end and to wait for his return, this period of his life, would be a life about what Jesus was continuing to do and teach, a life seeking to be clothed by the Spirit.

Between now and Pentecost, I suggest we pray, in these 10 days before Pentecost, for a fresh awareness and confidence in the Lord's promised return, we pray for a fresh outpouring, clothing, upon us of his Spirit.

Let us pray.

Risen, ascended Lord,  
as we rejoice at your triumph,  
fill us and your Church across this land with power and  
compassion,  
that all who are estranged and wounded by sin  
may find forgiveness, healing and know your peace,  
to the glory of God the Father. **Amen.**