

The Upper Culm Valley Mission Community
The Parishes of Hemyock with Culm Davy, Clayhidon and Culmstock

12th May 2024
Sunday after Ascension Day

Collect

Risen, ascended Lord,
as we rejoice at your triumph,
fill your Church on earth with power and compassion,
that all who are estranged by sin
may find forgiveness and know your peace,
to the glory of God the Father.

Readings.

Daniel 7:9-14

As I looked, thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened.

Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of

Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Luke 24:44-53

Then Jesus said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Reflection

Rev. John Stone

The stories we read tend to fall into one of two categories. There are stories which represent an orderly view of life. They have a beginning, a middle and an end, a pattern and a purpose that can be seen and understood. They have a conclusion that ties up the loose ends, so that when the book is closed there are no more questions to be asked. It is complete. Then there are stories which are open-ended. They contain a variety of loose connections and accidental happenings. They have a development that can never be fully grasped, and they don't have a tidy ending, because tidiness can never contain either the muddle or the mystery of life. When the book is closed the questions keep on coming.

One of the fascinating things about the story of Jesus' Ascension, which we celebrated last Thursday, is that it is a story which, depending on your point of view, can be interpreted both ways. You can read it as a story which

completes everything, or you can read it as a story that leaves everything open-ended. The Ascension does complete the mission of Jesus on earth, it is the last act of the cycle of his life, death and resurrection which celebrates the return of Jesus to his Father. The Ascension is also open-ended, because it marks the beginning of a new time. A time when the apostles had to learn to live with a different kind of presence of Jesus from the one they had known before.

That 'new time' is still going on, and life in the middle of something new is inevitably messy and muddled. There is a tension between how things are and how things ought to be, between the 'now' and the 'not yet'. Not only is this process of the coming of the kingdom of God continuing, but we don't know if we are at the beginning of the Christian movement, in the middle of it, or near the end. It could all end next week. It could equally continue for another two thousand years or even longer. We just don't know. All we know is that we are somewhere between the beginning and the end and that we are confronted by the same challenge to keep the story of Jesus alive as those first disciples were when they looked up towards heaven after Jesus disappeared from view.

There is a very real sense in which we are an 'in between people'. We are, each of us living out the story of our own particular lives in between the complicated mix of stories going on all around us. And whilst our personal stories have had a beginning and will have an ending, we didn't start from square one, from zero. Like it or not, we are middle people. We were born into a world that was already in motion, into a history that we had no part in. We found ourselves surrounded by family traditions that were formed by our parents and grandparents. We are part of a society which had, and still has, its own particular laws and beliefs, its norms of conduct and its ways of doing things. If we had been born in a different century on a different continent there is no doubt about the fact that would see things very differently. But we inherited the times we live in and we could make a start for ourselves only because we had been given a start by others. We owe everything to those who went before us, and we have the responsibility of shaping our lives and our society for the benefit of those who will come after us.

But as well as our own stories, we have the story of Jesus, and that is a powerful gift which has been given to us. It is a gift which helps us to shape our own lives and the lives of the community around us. The story of Jesus doesn't just reflect how things are in the world, but it is a story which calls us to something beyond ourselves. It calls us to a kingdom that is larger than the boundaries of earthly geography, nationality and culture. It's a kingdom that is even larger than time and space because it is based on the story of God's intervention in human history and God's relationship with human society.

The little bit of the story we have heard in our readings this morning, the story of the Ascension, reminds us that there is a sense in which Jesus is now beyond us, and like his heavenly Father, can never be contained. But that same story also reminds us that Jesus is still working with us just as much as he was with those first disciples. He continues to confirm his truth with little signs of hope which point towards the coming of his kingdom.

So this Sunday we rest in that little space between Ascension and Pentecost. It is a puzzling space, a place of unknowing. But the space of unknowing is where we often live most of our Christian life. We are called to be 'in the world but not of it'. The gospel continues to challenge us. It beckons us on to move beyond those boundaries that in our fear and weakness and short-sightedness we have set for ourselves.

Our stories aren't by any means finished. The last word hasn't been written. The final scenes are still open-ended. Whilst the future continues to be a mystery, there is still hope at work even in the apparently most hopeless situations we see in the world. That is the good news, part of the truth that is beyond us and yet part of who and what we are. So long as we try to do what we believe to be the will of Jesus for his present-day disciples, our stories become part of his story.