

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a brilliant way of marking the penultimate week of our sermon series, the life and ministry of Jesus. Perhaps in some ways we should finish the series this week, but we are not, for reasons I will explain next week!

The reading falls into three parts. First, we have a summary of Luke's gospel – the same Luke being the author of Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Second we have a section describing the 40 days after Jesus' resurrection and how they are moving towards the conclusion. And third, Jesus leaving the disciples, and the disciples being reassured that Jesus would return.

So let's have a look at each of those, but I don't just want to look at what Luke says, but I want to talk about these sections in the context of something called, 'Thy Kingdom Come', the first few days of which have rather passed us by this year.

So let's start with Thy Kingdom Come or TKC as those who lead it like to call it. TKC is a global ecumenical prayer movement that invites Christians around the world to pray for more people to come to know Jesus.

What started in 2016 as an invitation from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the Church of England has grown into an international and ecumenical call to prayer. These days there are video talks each day – available from the TKC website or through an app – and there are booklets to help us pray during the week, but I'm sorry that we missed the boat on that one this year.

But at the centre of TKC is a call for all Christians to pray for 5 people that they know who they would like to come to know Jesus, and that we should pray for those 5 people every day from Ascension Day, which was last Thursday, until Pentecost, which is next Sunday. I therefore encourage each and every one of you to join this prayer initiative today – as today is the day that we are celebrating the Ascension. You may even want to continue for a few days after Pentecost to make the 11 days which TKC covers.

So what has TKC, or Thy Kingdom Come, got to do with the reading from the Acts of the Apostles – well everything really.

The first part – the reference to Luke writing about, 'all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up to heaven', is really just saying this is what we want more people, but particularly our 5 people, to know more about. It is that book, or if we prefer one of the three other gospels, that we should be regularly reading, and that we hear from each Sunday in church – it is the story of Jesus, the story we want more people to hear about.

It's interesting to note that much of the first part of our reading is in fact a repeat of the last few verses of Luke's gospel, but in his gospel Luke tells it in a different way.

'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 worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.'

This telling feels a bit different, and that is because the gospel version is the end of a story, the climax of the story, whereas the Acts version is the beginning of a story.

One is telling us how Jesus' life and ministry finished in human form, the other is telling us how his life and ministry continues in a spiritual form. No longer can the apostles (which is Luke's favourite description for those first 12 disciples) talk to Jesus as they can to each other – they can only talk to him through prayer. Rather like us, and Thy Kingdom Come.

And this is actually very much our second part describing the 40 days after his resurrection and how they are moving towards the conclusion. There was lots of teaching, lots of praying, and of course, the promise of the Holy Spirit – but I can't talk about that until next week!

And then we get the third part, Jesus ascending into heaven. The end of Jesus' ministry on earth.

There is something quite strange about this episode – or if not strange perhaps just hard to understand? Did Jesus really float up into the sky? Was Jesus going to heaven because that is where his Father is? So is heaven really a place up there above the clouds?

Actually clouds are used in the bible to represent the presence of God – when the Israelites were escaping Egypt they followed a cloud by day and a column of fire by night, and when Solomon built his temple when completed it was filled with cloud, being the presence of God. So we shouldn't be surprised by clouds.

So that is how things appear to be being described, but I rather think this is one of those occasions where we should not take things too literally. There is much to understand about earth and heaven, and the promised new earth and new heaven that are coming together to form that place so amazingly described in the Book of Revelation – in fact also predicted in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, but to understand fully what is going on here is something we would need several weeks to look into, and lots of reading of academic articles, but I don't think that is what we are meant to be concerned about here today.

To me we can very much simplify what is happening. Jesus has completed the job that his father sent him to earth to do, and in the same miraculous way in which he came to earth he now is leaving.

We don't really understand how he came – apart from that it was miraculous – so we don't have to understand how he leaves. But we do need to understand why he came, and we do need to understand the significance of his leaving.

Why did he come? Jesus came to this world to save us, to save humankind, to help us be reunited with God – the God that loves each and every one of us but who, throughout history, has been argued with, disobeyed, ignored. And Jesus did that by accepting the most horrendous death on the cross as the punishment we all deserved because of our past and future sins.

Why did he leave? After accepting that punishment his father God brought him back to life to show us all that there is a future beyond our lives on this earth, and by leaving this earth God showed us, that if we follow his Son's lead on how we should live our lives, we can depart this earth in a similar way – whatever that way actually was.

And there are two other things that we are told about this event, one from the gospel, one from Acts, that confirm that to us.

From the gospel. 'And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.' Jesus, in his last teaching to the apostles had made it clear that his leaving them was a good thing because of what it meant. The apostles had realised this and so celebrated. That is why we mark Ascension day in the church – because it is something to be celebrated.

And then from Acts we have two men in white robes. Men in white robes appear in various places in the bible – last seen in Luke's gospel reassuring the women in the tomb that it was good news that Jesus' body was no longer there. These men are angels – messengers from God.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Jesus may have gone, but these angels are telling the apostles that he is coming back

[Fowlmere] At our Morning Worship service in Foxton this morning we performed a drama called Looking up, and to cut along story short, it was 5 people looking up waiting for Jesus to return and not doing anything – except waiting.

[Foxton] And this is where our drama comes in where our 5 characters were just waiting for that return.

What the rest of the book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us is what we should be doing now. Jesus has gone and has not yet returned, so what should we be doing in the meantime as we wait? And before I list a few things which might be slight scary, remember that God promised that he would ensure that we have the ability to do whatever he calls us to do – and that is through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, the first thing that happens is there is a vacancy in the 1st century PCC – and Matthias is chosen – by the casting of lots. Annual Meeting a week tomorrow, just saying!

Peter addresses the crowd and 3,000 people come to know Christ. In Thy Kingdom Come, through our prayers, we are hoping for 5 – each.

And throughout the book of Acts there is the story of how the early church worked out how they should operate.

There is lots of prayer – for boldness, for healing, for guidance as to where to go when on a missionary journey, there is a story of how they dealt with disagreements, and there is all about how Paul planted new churches wherever he went on his journeys. So much for us to learn from.

And this is all going on whilst we wait for Jesus’ return. And we are also told not to worry about when that will be – not even Jesus knows: that is in the hands of his Father.

So the message of the Ascension is be glad it happened because it was always meant to happen, remember the message of those angels that Jesus will return, and in the meantime, get on with the job that Jesus is calling us to do. And one of those messages is to encourage other people to come to know Jesus, and Thy Kingdom Come is one way in which we can try and do that.

Amen.