

Collect for Thy Kingdom Come

Almighty God,
your ascended Son has sent us into the world
to preach the good news of your kingdom:
inspire us with your Spirit
and fill our hearts with the fire of your love,
that all who hear your Word
may be drawn to you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹

[Acts 1:6-14](#)

Thursday was Ascension Day, and the best comment I've read about Ascension Day this week was a one-liner that a friend of mine shared on Facebook. Ascension Day was, she said, 'When Jesus went back to working from home.'

I've noted in previous years how we have questions about the story of the Ascension – do we really believe heaven is 'up there', and so on? I'm not going to talk about those issues this year, although if you want to discuss them, ask me to talk about Calvin's doctrine of accommodation.

No – instead of us asking questions of the Ascension, I want to suggest that the story of the Ascension asks questions of us.

Firstly, the story asks us about our *priorities*:

⁶ Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

⁷ He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

The disciples still don't get it. They still want a Messiah for the benefit of the Jewish people only. Effectively, they're saying, what's in it for us? When do we get all the blessings?

But Jesus says, never mind that, you need to be focussing on what's to come. The Holy Spirit is coming to empower you to be my witnesses here, there, and everywhere.

As I read this, I couldn't help but think of John F Kennedy's famous words in his inaugural address as President of the USA:

Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

I think there's a Christian equivalent. Whilst not denying or despising the generous love of God that loves to bless us, I think some of us need to hear Jesus saying, 'Ask not what the kingdom of God can do for you, ask what you can do for the kingdom of God.'

There's our priority. When the Holy Spirit fills us, we become – to use Paul's metaphor – ambassadors for Christ. Everywhere Jesus sends us in life, we are his representatives.

Is it a priority in our thinking about how we might best represent Jesus Christ wherever we go on our life's journey?

Secondly, the story asks us about our *preparations*:

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

To be fair to the disciples, what they witnessed was an extraordinary moment. The words of the two men dressed in white – that is, angels – come both as a comfort and a reproach. There is the comfort that Jesus will be back. But there is also the reproach to stop gazing into the sky.

If you're anything like me, you will know there have been certain occasions when you have frittered away the time on trivial things when you should have been occupying your mind with something serious and weighty. I guess most of us do that from time to time.

But I suspect also that there are some of us in the church who have turned frittering the time away on the shallow, the trivial, and the inconsequential into an art form. The disciples are meant to be getting ready for the kingdom

purposes of God. They are meant to be preparing for the great cause for which they were born and chosen.

Yet some of us hardly ever prepare our hearts and minds for the purposes of God. We go through Sunday worship, but then never pick up a Bible in the rest of the week. We only read superficial books, and never go near Christian literature. We only pray when we're in trouble – after all, we've done prayer at church on Sunday.

The last thing I want to suggest is that we become dull and humourless people. The love of God in our lives should see to that, anyway. But I do want us all to be challenged about whether we are being intentional in preparing ourselves for wherever God leads us and whatever life throws at us.

Don't just gawp into the sky.

Thirdly and finally, the story asks us about our *praying*:

¹² Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk^[a] from the city. ¹³ When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴ They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

This time the disciples don't get a telling-off. They've got the memo. Their good example is what questions us. At this point, they begin a prayer meeting that will last ten days, until it is broken up the Holy Spirit arriving like tongues of fire.

If you know me at all well, you will know that one thing that makes me despair in today's church is the search for new techniques and methods to 'bring people in'. I think it's a lot to do with living in a technological society: the same way of thinking carries over to the church. There must be a technology we can deploy to make things right.

But I think there's more to it than that. Our obsession with the latest fashionable ideas that worked for somebody else somewhere else (and sold a load of books) is also a deliberate swerve to avoid the importance of the

spiritual basics, like prayer. For many of us, prayer has been reduced to 'that thing we do in a crisis' rather than seeing it as fuel for the Gospel.

Prayer is where all three of the questions the Ascension asks us come together. Prayer is the priority. Prayer is central to preparation. Without prayer, anything we do just makes us into religious politicians. And that's not an appealing image.

We are three days into this year's Thy Kingdom Come prayer pilgrimage. Spending the ten days from Ascension to Pentecost every year praying for five people we love to discover Christ for themselves reminds us that prayer is key to God's mission in the Church.

In our story, the episode ends with the prayer meeting in full swing. With hindsight, we know what will soon happen.

How will our story end? To end in a good way, prayer needs to be central.

Responsory

As we wait in silence,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we listen to Your word,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we worship You in majesty,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we long for Your refreshing,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we long for Your renewing,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we long for Your equipping,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

As we long for Your empowering,
Make us ready for Your coming Spirit.

The Blessing

God the Father,
who has given to His Son the name above every name,

Strengthen you to proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord.

Amen.

God the Son,
who is our great high priest passed into the heavens,
plead for you at the right hand of the Father.

Amen.

God the Holy Spirit,
who pours out His abundant gifts upon the Church,
make you faithful servants of Christ our King.

Amen.

And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

Amen.

Surprise Ending!

If you wish to donate to Tear Fund, please go to www.tearfund.org/give Thank you.

¹ The Collect, Responsory, and Blessing all come from the Thy Kingdom Come 2020 Ascension Day service. This can be downloaded from www.thykingdomcom.global