Sunday 29th May 2022

Acts 1: 1-11 – Ascension just part of the journey

I have begun to increase my efforts in jogging again. After a period of time completing the park run every Saturday, to my back then giving out and then the pandemic stopping the runs, I have been less than regularly committed to jogging.

Over the last few months I have been building up again, starting at just 2K, then working to 3K – but the last few weeks I have completed 5K runs.

I know that the exercise is good for me, I like listening to music for that amount of time (and the speed I run I hear a LOT of songs) and I love the smug feeling I get once I have finished – but as I am running it is hard work. I tend to follow the same routes so I have markers to how far I have travelled and how far I have left to run.

One route I begin on grass, I then join a gravelly pathway that leads me later onto tarmac. This is beside a river and when I finish on that tarmac path and turn left back onto grass, I know that I have completed my first kilometer and have begun on the second.

Just because I have finished on the tarmac does not mean that I have finished my run, but it does mean that one part of it is completed.

At the beginning of the passage in Acts, Luke states that he had previously written about all that Jesus had begun to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven. This implies that the work of Jesus did not stop at the time He ascended into heaven. A bit like a stage of my running route – it is stating that the ministry of Jesus would continue. His ministry on earth may have been completed but His ministry from heaven was about to begin.

When we read some of the events of Jesus whilst on earth He was an agitator wasn’t He? Sometimes we can think that word is automatically a bad thing – but Jesus always spoke the truth, which agitated people out of their comfort zones.

He did not speak the truth through words of condemnation, but in a way that presented people with a different thought process.

He did not corner them into submission but gave them opportunity to take the truth He spoke into their own decision making.

Jesus brought healing, compassion, justice, forgiveness and love to all whom He met. He came to personify the law that had been given through Moses – the law that had been set in place to offer protection to the most vulnerable and bring health to all who followed the law.

As He lived the intention of the law, He broke the letter of the law that had been set by the religious leaders. He caused agitation. That was the ministry of Jesus on earth.

When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, He was promised as a witness not only to what Jesus had already taught the apostles, but also to continue to teach them.

It may be that we think that after spending around 3 years with someone, that the disciples had all learned everything about the way Jesus lived and the kingdom of God.

But we read that the apostles asked Jesus “Are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”.

After three years and with this question they reveal that they still misunderstood the foundation of the kingdom that Jesus had continually spoken about.

Restore – implies that they were still expecting Jesus to respond to the political and territorial situation, a geographical area.

Israel – implies that they still understood it to be a national kingdom on earth.

At this time – they were still expecting it to be an immediate action.

They still expected or desired that Israel would have a king restored to reign, the Romans would be ejected and that it was going to happen then and there, so things would go back to normal.

Jesus responds with a revelation of the truth. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you”.

Every kingdom has a figure of authority, that holds power. The apostles were expecting a king of Israel – but Jesus says to them “You will receive power”. The Holy Spirit is the power of the kingdom of heaven. Anyone who allows Him to dwell in them has the power of the kingdom of God within them. There is only one ruler – but there are many parts to the kingdom, and it is not going to be based on a geographical area – they were to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Jesus gave no answer to the part of the question, when. It was, and is, in the hands of God to set the time. The apostles had to be willing to be left in ignorance of some facts – and it is the same for us today. We may not know everything – but what we do know is still valid, worthwhile and a powerful message of life and justice.

And we have read of the event that separates the earthly ministry of Jesus to His heavenly ministry. It was not His death, or His resurrection, but His ascension into heaven.

If you struggle with imagining the physical spectacle of Jesus ascending into heaven, you are not alone. There have been debates to whether it actually happened, or whether Luke was using poetic or symbolic language. This theory has been widely rejected, but the thought of Jesus ascending into space hidden by a cloud is difficult to reconcile in my mind.

There is no answer, so perhaps the specifics of this fact we need to be willing to be left in ignorance. It does not make the truth of His ascension any less truthful or meaningful, just something that we cannot explain.

What we can know from the passage is that the ascension of Jesus was visible to those present.

When we read that He will return in the same way, it does not mean that we have to keep our eyes peeled for a cloud descending – but we can hold on to the fact that it will be visible and glorious. The return of Jesus will be personal as He is a God concerned with relationships, but it will not be private – doesn’t the bible tell us in the first chapter of Revelation “every eye shall see Him”?

But the world still needs Jesus now.

I was struck by the phrase that I used earlier, that many still expected or desired that Israel would have a king restored to reign, the Romans would be ejected and that it was going to happen then and there, so things would go back to normal.

How often have we heard that phrase during the pandemic?

There is still confusion in the world, fear, anxiety, disease, illness, injustice and hatred. Don’t we see it on the news, and in our own community?

We need to cling to the order of things. Ascension (Jesus’ ministry from heaven) – Pentecost (the anointing of the power of the Holy Spirit) when we each become a part of the kingdom – Witness and mission (to continue right up to the Parousia – Parousia (the return of Jesus when the kingdom of God will come in fullness).

We are living in that time between Pentecost and Parousia, so time of witness and mission. We must seek where the Holy Spirit is leading us, so that we can continue to agitate the injustice in our community. Confront the wrong and harmful attitudes of status, hatred and discrimination of any kind.

What is our witness? For some this may be by being involved in social justice issues, being a part of protests (such as those in response to the killing of George Floyd or leading the campaigns against slave traders), lobbying parliament and signing petitions against unfair policies. For others it may be being a true friend to someone, not telling them what they want to hear, but imparting honesty to them.

Simple acts of kindness are powerful witness too. As a church we welcome many people into our activities. We do not judge, we do not turn anyone away. We welcome them. That is a witness, that is what Jesus did whilst on earth, so why would His ministry change?

We can and will be witnesses and agitators for Jesus; not by force, or humiliation, but by living the intention of God’s law in this community and flooding our personal surroundings with the love of Jesus.