**Sermon on the Ascension**

**Acts 1: 1-11 & Lk. 24: 44-53**

**A**. In the days of yore when I taught A Level history one speaker at the Historical Society coined a helpful mantra “We all know what the FACTS are, but we don’t all know what they MEAN.” I was not sure how true the first part was of a few of my pupils &, certainly, the true meaning of what they knew might escape some of them-which made studying History so enthralling for me.

Similarly, Luke gives us the FACTS about the Ascension in Acts 1: 1-11 which is the second part of his work describing “all that Jesus began to do & to teach until He was taken up into Heaven” –the gospel of Luke 1: 1-2. Like a good historian he used accounts “handed down to us from those who from the first were eyewitnesses & servants of the word.” He “carefully investigated everything” to produce “an orderly account” Lk. 1: 2-3. In our second reading, Lk. 24: 44-53 he gives a compressed factual outline of the Ascension which he expands at the start of Acts.

We shall explore, in brief, what the Ascension MEANS, as it closes the lord Jesus’ earthly ministry-40 days after the Resurrection. He returns to Heaven-to be seated at God’s right hand to show His work on earth is completed Heb. 1: 3, to intercede for us Heb. 2: 27-18 & to await the Father’s time to return in glory to judge the world Mk. 13: 26-27. He promises the holy Spirit to enable His servants in their task of witnessing to Him in the world.

**B.** The FACTS & their MEANING.

1. He shows Himself Acts 1: 3-4 “After His suffering, He showed himself to these men & gave many convincing proofs that He was alive…On one occasion, while He was eating with them..” This meant it was vital for his disciples to see, know & accept that He really was alive-He had been raised from the dead by God’s great power-miraculous & evidence that He was the Son of God-the Messiah. As Peter said in his first sermon after Pentecost “God has raised this Jesus to life, & we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God…” Acts 1:33 or as in Hebrew 1: 3 “After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven.” The stress on being exalted, seated & twice on the right hand of God means that His work on earth is completed-the penalty of sins has been paid, the first disciples have been called & He “always lives to intercede for them.” Heb. 7: 25. He is the Sovereign Lord in charge of all things. It’s like when I’ve managed to work through all the items on my gardening list, I can sit down knowing I’ve finished all that needs to be done.
2. He explains that all His sufferings were foretold in the prophets-“This is what I told you when I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets & the Psalms.” Lk. 24: 44.

This meant that He needs to reassure & make clear to the disciples that the tragic events leading up to his Crucifixion were not a disaster, dashing all their hopes-NOT the result of a randomly malign series of events, which left them paralysed by despair & terror. As Peter said “This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose & foreknowledge.” Acts 2: 23. Thus, there was hope & a purpose behind it all. God’s purpose was revealed to the Prophets like Isaiah, whose stress on the Messiah as the Suffering Servant had been misunderstood by Israel for over 400 years since their return from the Exile. Hence, the disciples question about independence from Rome for Israel-a nationalistic hope-“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Acts 1: 6. The penny dropped only when “He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer & rise from the dead on the third day…’” Lk. 24: 45-6. There was, now, (as foretold) a clear path through the dismal fog of disappointment & sorrow, for the Risen Christ would lead them into the future.

1. The future involved His followers’ forthcoming task, since He gave “instructions through the Holy Spirit to the Apostles He had chosen.” Acts 1: 2. They were to be “witnesses to these things” Lk. 24: 48 with a wide remit “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, & in all Judea & Samaria, & to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1: 8. That last phrase is one which has driven Christians on since then, though there are still isolated tribes who have never heard the Good News-maybe this is true of too many in our present secular world.

What are the “things” that they witnessed-the “instructions” He gave-the contents of the message to be spread everywhere? There’s “repentance & forgiveness of sins, (which) will be preached in His name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem.” Lk. 24: 47. These key changes will be the start, so that anyone can join “the kingdom of God”, about which He spoke in the 40 days before the Ascension Acts 1: 3-the acceptance of God as the King & boss of their life.

1. His final exit or departure from this world could be a heart wrenching moment for them, but “He lifted up his hands & blessed them. While He was blessing them, He was taken up into heaven.” Lk. 23: 50-51. In Acts 1: 9 “…He was taken up before their very eyes, & a cloud hid Him from their sight.” A cloud was often a sign of God’s presence, so it meant He was returning to his Father. Were they now to be totally deserted & left alone to carry one with the formidable task of being His witnesses? No-He had promised just before leaving them “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Lk. 23: 49. The Holy Spirit will enable them to carry out His instructions-the Spirit’s coming we celebrate at Pentecost.

**C.** The disciples’ response-what an emotional switchback for them-from deep gloom after the Cross & uncertainty about what next after the Resurrection to a dawning joy at understanding what was really happening! At first “They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going..”Acts 1: 10-they could not adjust from their old way of seeing Him, till the angels challenged them “Men of Galilee …why do you stand here looking into the sky.” Not only were there things to do now, but “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way…”Acts 1: 11. If they wondered when that might be, “It was not for (them) to know the times & dates the Father has set by his own authority.” Acts 1: 7. They had needed Him to open “their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” Lk. 23: 45 about His suffering & the future.

-Their dawning joy meant “Then they worshipped Him & returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple praising God.” Lk. 23: 52-53. What a turn around for them! So cheered & encouraged they expectantly awaited Pentecost.

**D.** What does all this mean for us-how can we follow the disciples?

1. We can praise & worship the Lord Jesus-ascended to God’s right hand, as His work on earth is finished-His work of paying sin’s penalty, defeating death & ruling as the Sovereign Lord & Creator. We can rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit.
2. We need, also, to trust Him & rely on Him the sovereign Lordto fulfil His promises in our daily living.
3. We can ask him, expectantly, to “open our minds to understand the Scriptures” & to help us as we, the Church family, emerge from lockdown-somewhat battered-we’ve lost Jack & Pat & prepare for the link with North Bucks, to be His witnesses here & now in 2021 at Stowe.