

Podcast Reflection Ascension 2021: Revd Helen Hollands

Sometimes we Methodists and those of other free church traditions overlook some of the seasons of the Christian year and Ascension may be one of them. Ascension Day, which was Thursday this week, is the day when we mark the withdrawal of Jesus into heaven, as the gospel writer Luke says (24:51), 'while he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven'. Although the disciples were blessed they must have felt the absence of Jesus, it is hard to be separated from precious friends, and Jesus had turned all their lives around after all.

The fact that this short season is all about the absence rather than the presence of Jesus may be one reason it is overlooked. For some high church traditions, it is a day when the Easter candle is blown out and maybe that says it all, Jesus is gone now, that's all, that's done.

Yet, it isn't absence at all, just difference. Jesus is not anywhere but is everywhere, within them and amongst them and he has promised the coming of the Holy Spirit to lead and inspire his followers. Pentecost is just around the corner but our reading today is from John's gospel, and is part of the farewell discourse of Jesus as he is gathered around the table with the disciples prior to his arrest and death. Here he intercedes for his friends, he holds them before God that they might be protected, that they might be one, that they will, despite everything, experience his joy. It is a lengthy prayer for those that he loves who may now be in considerable danger and he knows he must leave them and be absent from them for a while.

We don't often talk about a sense of absence of God, although this experience is reflected in our biblical texts. From the cross, Jesus cries, 'My God, why have you forsaken me'? The laments of many Psalms cry out with words of suffering and anger at God's apparent desertion in times of need. Martha says to Jesus, 'if you had been here my brother would not have died'. A friend of mine whose son died in tragic circumstances spoke movingly of his sense of God's absence and asked others to pray for him when he couldn't manage it himself. Many of us have such experiences which St John of the Cross described as 'the dark night of the soul' and they can feel like a spiritual crisis from which we find it hard to move on. Somehow we find a way, time and communities of loving friendship can make all the difference.

I wonder how the disciples really felt when they were suddenly without Jesus alongside them. Luke tells us that they continued to worship him with joy but they must have wondered what the future would hold. There were reminders

everywhere, in their being together, in the recollections and we are told that they found a home in the temple.

There are many today who have lost loved ones and throughout their grief continue to be reminded and carry memories in their hearts. A few days ago, I was visiting a friend who had lost her husband to Covid and she remarked on the vines he planted in their garden and the sometimes variable wine he would make as a result. Such memories make families smile. The Queen will inevitably continue to see events as Prince Philip might have viewed them, in my own family we often remark on what Grandma might have said or done. This is the way of things with those we love and have died, we keep their memory alive.

There must have been some of this with Jesus, the disciples loved him and carried his teaching into their own lives, but of course there is so much more to come. They are commissioned and inspired, let loose into the world. They are encouraged to live and breathe their faith, to act as one so that the world might believe through the example of their lives. Despite disagreements they are to let their love for one another be their guiding light. They are witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, encouraged to spread the word, lift up the meek and challenge the mighty, to speak out against injustice, to expand the circle of God's loving presence ever wider and to bring God's kingdom closer on earth through friendship, compassion and kindness. Jesus has gone deeper into the heart of their and now our reality. Jesus means for his disciples to show the world that there is another way of being human, to follow his model for living and to follow his model for serving.

One extraordinary example of such witness is that of Francesco Tuccio, a carpenter on the island of Lampedusa. There have been many refugees who have arrived on the island fleeing hardship and the dangers of the sea. On the 11 October, 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa. 311 Eritrean and Somali refugees were drowned en route from Libya to Europe. The inhabitants of Lampedusa helped to save the lives of 155 others. After meeting some of the survivors who are Eritrean Christians in the church on Lampedusa, Mr Tuccio was moved by their plight but felt frustrated that he could not make a difference to their situation. The best he could do was to use his skills as a carpenter to make each of them a cross from the wreckage of the boat as a reflection on their salvation from the sea and hope for the future. Mr Tuccio also made a cross for the British Museum to mark an extraordinary moment in European history and the fate of Eritrean Christians (see below). It also stands witness to the kindness of the people on this small island who have done what they can for the refugees and migrants who arrive on their shores.

It is a remarkable example and an inspiration. May we also be encouraged to remind people around us that we are not on our own and we are not bereft through the example of our lives.

May we know that Jesus is present within and around each one of us, and those we meet, every day and always.

*Alleluia! Not as orphans,
are we left in sorrow now.
Alleluia! He is near us,
faith believes, nor questions how.
Though the clouds from sight received him,
when the forty days were o'er,
shall our hearts forget his promise,
'I am with you evermore'?*

STF 568 William Chatterton Dix (1837 – 1898)