**COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE SERVICE**

*Presenter: Revd Dr Calvin T Samuel*

**7th Sunday of Easter**

**Sunday, 24th May 2020 – Ascension & Aldersgate Sunday**

**~ Journey to Pentecost 3 ~**

**Welcome & Introduction**:

Good Morning. Welcome to this covenant community online service. My name is Calvin Samuel and I’m Methodist minister for the towns of Rochford and Rayleigh in the County of Essex.

Today we celebrate Ascension Sunday. For us Methodists it’s also Aldersgate Sunday. On 24th May 1738 John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, was in a prayer meeting near Aldersgate Street in London, in which he felt his heart strangely warmed. That moment marked a change in his life and ministry. In the months that followed he and others organised small societies for those seeking deeper discipleship. Those societies eventually earned the nickname Methodist, because of their intentional and methodical pursuit of spiritual vitality. So, Aldersgate in many ways marks the moment of conception of what was later to become Methodism.

It’s also the 7th and final Sunday of Easter. So, for the final time this year we begin with that ancient Easter declaration:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

**Hymn : O for a thousand tongues to sing** (StF 364)

O for a thousand tongues to sing

My great Redeemer’s praise,

The glories of my God and King,

The triumphs of his grace!

﻿See all your sins on Jesus laid:

the Lamb of God was slain;

his soul was once an offering made

that all may heaven gain.

﻿

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,

he sets the prisoner free;

his blood can make the foulest clean,

his blood availed for me.

My gracious Master and my God

assist me to proclaim

To spread through all the earth abroad

The honours of thy name!

*Charles Wesley 1707–1788*

**PRAYERS** Let us pray.

Almighty and everlasting Father,

you raised our Lord Jesus Christ to your right hand on high.

As we rejoice in his exaltation, fill us with his Spirit,

that we may go into all the world and faithfully proclaim

the gospel. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity

of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

**Prayers of Confession** Let us confess our sins to God:

O God, we confess the blindness

that is not even aware of sinning;

The pride that dare not admit it is wrong;

The selfishness that can see nothing but its own will;

The righteousness that knows no fault;

The callousness that has ceased to care;

The defiance that does not regret its own sins;

The evasion that always tries to make excuses;

The coldness of heart that is too hardened to repent.

God, we are sinners. Be merciful to us. Amen.

*Brief silence*

To all who truly repent this is God’s gracious word:
'Your sins are forgiven'.

**Amen. Thanks be to God.**

**SCRIPTURE**

The Ascension of Jesus occurred 40 days after the resurrection and 10 days before Pentecost. It’s one of the four major Christian festivals along with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. It stands at a transition point between resurrection encounters with Jesus and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost. Let’s now listen to the account of the Ascension in Acts chapter 1.

**Acts 1.1–11**

*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

*So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing 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.”*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**Hymn : King of Kings, Majesty** (StF 331)

King of Kings, Majesty

God of Heaven living in me
Gentle Saviour, closest friend
Strong Deliverer, beginning and end
All within me falls at Your throne

*Your Majesty, I can but bow
I lay my all before You now
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve Your Majesty*

Earth and Heaven worship You
Love eternal, Faithful and True
Who bought the nations, ransomed souls
Brought this sinner near to Your throne
All within me cries out in praise.

*Your majesty, I can but bow…*

*Jarrod Cooper*

**The Sermon**

Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing toward heaven? This was the question that the angels asked the disciples on that first Ascension Day. It seems an excellent question. Jesus had left the ministry he inaugurated in their hands, instructed them to wait for power to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. This was an urgent task. They, however, stood gazing. So much so that angels had to ask, ‘Why do you stand gazing?’

I believe today that same question can rightly be asked of the church in general, including our church family; ‘Why do you standing gazing?’ Jesus has left his ministry in our hands, commanded us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth and promised the Holy Spirit to empower us for the tasks to which we’ve been called. And what is our response?

All too often we the Church are to be found gazing towards heaven; wrapped up in the wonder, caught up in the mystery and the worship of God, we’re concerned with personal piety, spiritual growth, and rightly desire a closer walk with God. Put another way, we the church quite enjoy gazing towards heaven to catch a glimpse of the glory of God. When Isaiah caught a glimpse of the glory of God, high and lifted up, Isaiah first exclaimed woe is me, but his next statement is, here am I send me. Gazing towards heaven is OK if it propels us to go to share God’s message.

What strikes me about the conversations of Jesus with his disciples after the resurrection is his focus upon mission. After the resurrection Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to love each other, or instruct them to worship God, or to be people of prayer, or to be obedient to his teaching. Is it because these things are unimportant? I think not.

What then *does* Jesus say to his disciples in his post resurrection teaching? In Matthew 28 Jesus declared to his disciples, ‘Go into all the world and make disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Mark 16 Jesus declared, Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation! In Luke 24 Jesus taught his disciples that repentance and forgiveness are to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations. In John 21: Jesus declared to Peter and the other disciples feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. In Acts 1 Jesus said: Wait for power then be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all the earth.

Jesus is very uncompromising, unequivocal and unambiguous. Go into your neighbourhoods, across your nation, and the world. Tell people the good news of God both in word and deed. You might assume that given our history rooted in that warmed heart of John Wesley which compelled him to preach up and down this country for over 51 years, that we Methodists would be great at sharing our faith. Not so.

We have lovely services to which we invite people; lots of meetings about our spiritual lives, sermons, hymns and prayers to encourage, challenge and instruct. But in doing all of this we betray our true nature. If we’re honest, we would frankly much prefer to stand gazing towards heaven than to engage in mission among those around us. The disciples felt this way 2000 years ago. Many continue to feel this way today.

This is understandable because speaking to our neighbours and friends, our workmates, and the people we encounter about the Good News of Jesus can be hard, it feels presumptuous, it’s not easy to do. I think this is part of the reason that Jesus focuses on it so sharply. Jesus never said have prayer meetings, Sunday services, bible studies, coffee mornings and boot sales, though they are good useful and vital. However, Jesus did tell us to go in the power of the Spirit and to share our faith.

It is amazing how little faith we Christians have in the Good News of the gospel. We too often feel apologetic and reserved about telling people about Christ because we don’t expect them to respond positively.

When I was in my 20s I had 2 friends, that I was afraid to speak to about my faith. One of them is one of my oldest friends. I’ve known him since I was 11. The other is someone I worked with when I was a banker. We went to the gym together most evenings after work.

They knew I was a Christian, but I didn’t talk about faith with them. They were just too cool. They seemed to have everything already. They were good looking, very popular with the ladies, successful, and did I mention cool? So I thought what would talking about church or faith have to offer them? So I chickened out and never spoke to them about faith.

When I was 24 I left Antigua to come to Britain to train for ministry and I still hadn’t talked to these 2 close friends about my faith or sense of call to ministry. I lacked the courage to do it and I felt a bit ashamed about that.

A few years later each of them contacted me, separately, to tell me that they’d become Christians and they wanted me to know. I look back at that situation and think these are the guys to whom I was too embarrassed to say something about my faith, because I didn’t think they’d want to hear. Do you know what they’re doing now? Both of them are pastors. Someone else shared faith with them, thank God.

So many of us don’t speak of our faith because we assume that people won’t want to hear what we have to say. Or we think that our testimony is not especially attractive or compelling. I don’t know why we think that. Somebody at some stage told us about Jesus and we responded. So why do we feel so afraid that others will respond negatively to the Good News of the love of God? Why do we stand gazing towards heaven for a glimpse of Jesus rather than seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to be witnesses to Jesus?

God in wisdom sent two angels to the disciples as they stood on that mountain gazing towards heaven after Jesus had ascended. ‘Why do you stand gazing towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you saw him ascend.’ This Jesus who has ascended has left the future of his ministry in your hands and given you instructions about what to do next.

So the disciples went to Jerusalem, they prayed for power, and then in the power of the Spirit went to be witnesses to the risen Christ both in word and deed. We too need to go in the power of the Spirit to declare the Good News of God’s love to those we know. Why do we stand around gazing towards heaven? God is good; All the time. All the time; God is Good. We really need to share that Good News with those we already know. Amen.

**Hymn: Let the King of My heart be the mountain where I run**

Let the King of My Heart be the Mountain where I run

The fountain I drink from Oh, He is my song
Let the King of my heart be the shadow where I hide
The ransom for my life, Oh, He is my song

*You are good You are good, oh oh* (x4)

Let the King of my heart be the wind inside my sails
The anchor in the waves, oh, He is my song
Let the King of my heart, be the fire inside my veins
The echo of my days, oh, He is my song

*You are good….*

You're never gonna let
You're never gonna let me down (x4)

*You are good…*

When the night is holding on to me

God is holding on. (x2)

*Jarrod Cooper*

**Prayers of Intercession**

Let us join our prayers with those of our Saviour Christ,

seeking the Father’s blessing and the gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus Christ, great high priest,

living for ever to intercede for us,

pray for the Church, your broken body in the world …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, king of righteousness,

enthroned at the right hand of the majesty on high,

pray for the world, and make it subject to your gentle rule …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, Son of Man,

drawing humanity into the life of God, pray for your brothers and sisters in need, distress or sorrow.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, pioneer of our salvation,

bringing us to glory through your death and resurrection,

surround with your saints and angels

those who have died trusting your promises …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, Lord over all things,

ascended far above the heavens and filling the universe,

pray for us who receive the gifts you give us

for work in your service …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit

and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at your feet; for you are alive and reign

with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

We draw all our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus gave us in its modern form. The words will appear on your screen:

**Our Father in heaven,**

**hallowed be your Name,**

**your kingdom come, your will be done,**

**on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins,**

**as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,**

**now and forever. Amen.**

Our final song speaks of the God who calls us out of our comfort zone to places where our feet may fail. Like Peter who was called to step out of a boat and to place his faith in Jesus, so we are called to share our faith in places where we may feel afraid. I invite you to sing this song today as a prayer to God who calls us beyond ourselves so we can become all we were created to be.

**Hymn : You call me out upon the waters**

You call me out upon the waters

The great unknown where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep my faith will stand

*And I will call upon Your name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise, my soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine*

Your grace abounds in deepest waters
Your sovereign hand will be my guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me
You've never failed and You won't start now

*So I will call upon Your name…..*

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters

Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Saviour (x2)

*I will call upon Your name….*

*Joel Houston, Matt Crocker & Salomon Lighthelm*

**THE BLESSING**

The Spirit of truth lead you into all truth,

give you grace to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

and strengthen you to proclaim the word and works of God;

and the blessing of God,

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

abide with you this day and always. Amen.

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