

## **Ascension Life – SJD – 28/5/17- Acts 1: 6-14**

This week we have experienced the horror of the Manchester Concert suicide bombing. Our hearts go out to those families who have suffered loss and all those injured and still undergoing medical treatment. But it has also been a week of atrocities elsewhere. In Egypt a bus load of Coptic Christian pilgrims were attacked by Islamic militants killing 28 and injuring 22. Children were again victims. The Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "***I am heartbroken by the news of another awful attack on men, women and children, murdered because of their faith in Jesus Christ.***"<sup>1</sup> In the Philippines Islamic extremists tied to ISIS forced their way into St Mary's Cathedral in Marawi, taking Pastor Teresito 'Chito' Suganob, ten worshippers and three church workers hostage before burning down the church.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, of course warned of persecution for his followers while encouraging us to pray for our persecutors.<sup>3</sup> Jesus himself did as much on the Cross while the first Christian martyr, Stephen, copied Jesus's example just prior to his own death.<sup>4</sup> What interests me today is the ability of those early Christians to live this way. After all, it wasn't so much earlier that they were running scared, hiding behind locked doors.<sup>5</sup> As we think of the Ascension it is clear that it too ought to be a time of sorrow for Jesus's followers because Jesus is really leaving this time. Yet rather than bringing them down they appear ready to move on in a new way. So what was it about the Ascension that enabled them, or perhaps reinforced them at time of this closure of Jesus' earthly life?

**Power** – For those left behind after a death it is often a difficult time because they had no power to stop the death from happening. Their emptiness can often be filled by Guilt & regret resulting in anger or worse. Power, of course, lies at the heart of much of society and our lives. It is what drives organisations like ISIS – power over others – to be in positions of power and to bring about the power of those they claim to worship and follow. As we have heard, how different this is for the Christian. Of all the Christian festivals it is the Ascension that speaks most of power. As Jesus departs the earth he enters into heaven to sit in the place of supreme power – at the right hand of God<sup>6</sup>. Jesus achieved this not through any great army but through his own willing death on a Cross. Jesus's power came from his submission both to His Father's will and to the hands of his enemies. And he did this out of love for all people, whether they recognised him or not, whether they worshipped him or despised him. I am also interested in Stephen's statement about Jesus just before he dies. "***Look, he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"***".<sup>7</sup> There has been much debate why Jesus was seen standing and not sitting but it probably relates to Jesus's focus on Stephen. As one commentator writes, '***Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before***

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/World/Archbishop-Justin-Welby-heartbroken-by-Christian-gun-attack-as-death-toll>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/World/Priest-and-churchgoers-kidnapped-by-IS-militants-in-Philippines?>

<sup>3</sup> John 15 v 20 and Matthew 5 v 44

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23 v 34 and Acts 7 v 60.

<sup>5</sup> John 20 v 19

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 1 v 20

<sup>7</sup> Acts 7 v 56.

**God’.**<sup>8</sup> With this knowledge of where Jesus was going and what he would be doing, it is hardly surprising therefore that his followers are positive and not downcast. Jesus is in a true position of power – much greater than even they had even dared hope for.

**Path** – Following a bereavement there is usually a time of great uncertainty. Life cannot continue how it was, but all future paths are unclear. Jesus’s last words to his followers was to take his message of salvation and reconciliation with God and each other out into the world – **‘to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’.**<sup>9</sup> This gave them a clear path, a clear direction to follow and one that they subsequently took. In India there are many indigenous Christians who take this commission very seriously, fearlessly taking the Gospel into even militant areas. They do so following peaceful paths, seeking to help in practical as well as spiritual ways but often at great cost. Of course, the Ascension also makes clear that ultimately this path of Christian service will triumph. This is certain, not only because of where Jesus is now, but also because as Jesus said to those first follows – we are no longer alone and defenceless in this task. Jesus forbade the disciples from leaving Jerusalem until they receive power from on high.<sup>10</sup> The coming of the HS meant that the power and authority of Christ now occupied their frail bodies enabling them to serve as Christ had served. Jesus provided both the path and the power to follow it.

**Promise** – Finally Ascension finishes with a fantastic promise. **‘This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back’.**<sup>11</sup> I have little time to explore this now. However this I will say. It must have been a wonderful encouragement to those first disciples to know that at some time in the future Jesus would return and bring into fullness his kingdom. Tom Wright<sup>12</sup> makes an interesting contrast between Resurrection – Christianity and Kingdom-Christianity. He says the danger of R-C is that many modern Christians who follow this focus think that the point of Christianity is about ‘getting to heaven when we die’. By contrast a Christianity rooted in the Ascension focuses on Christ’s reign now. He is in the place of power, has provided us with a plan calling us to bring in his kingdom and begin to transform the world into the place it one day will become when Jesus returns.

We know how those first followers of Jesus ‘turned the world upside down’. This weeks events make clear that our world needs the same – the same impact from the same message of the same Saviour who was ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. May we, like those first disciples carry this mission forward through our prayers and our actions. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> F.F. Bruce quoted in Stott, JRW (1990) ‘The Message of Acts’. IVP p. 141

<sup>9</sup> Acts 1 v 8

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1 v 8

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1 v 11

<sup>12</sup> N T Wright (1994) ‘Following Jesus. Biblical reflections on discipleship’. SPCK Chapter 11.