24-5-20 St James Bolton, ‘Moving on Up!’ (Acts 1:6-14 7 John 17:1-11) by Rev Steve Lees

Last Thursday was Ascension Day when the Church remembers Jesus being taken up into Heaven. Jesus had come from Heaven to be born, live and die as a human being and then he returned to his heavenly home…what you might ask has this got to do with me? Everything! Today we’re going to look at 3 things that will help us make sense of Jesus’ Ascension:

* Pray
* Be Honest
* Receive

First of all, let’s look at our reading from John chapter 17. This happens on the night Jesus is arrested…and what is he doing just before he’s captured to be tortured and put to death? He PRAYS for three things. 1) for himself 2) for his disciples 3) for all believers.

1) Just before he dies, Jesus prays for himself; primarily that he will bring glory to the Father, particularly by giving eternal life…and this is eternal life: knowing God. *Knowing God, what you might ask does that mean?* …how can anyone know God? Put simply what that means to me is this; knowing or being confident that I am a child of God, deeply loved…when we truly know that, we ‘know God’ because God is love. Some of you might be thinking ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’…if that’s you and you want to find out more, just ask…contact us through the website…or at least ask God…bring your questions to him in PRAYER. Many of us think that to pray we have to use the right words in the right voice, & only when we’re living a perfect life…that’s not the Bible’s teaching on prayer…to pray is to come before God HONESTLY with whatever words we have, and to RECEIVE God’s reply…

2) Jesus prays for his disciples. He asks his Father to protect them, and specifically he says that, ‘glory has come to me through them.’v10. Glory means honour, praise, renown, magnificence…the disciples have given glory to Jesus by doing the things he asked…to love, to forgive, to serve.

3) Jesus prays for all believers. Hey that’s me and you! Don’t you find that amazing? Jesus prayed for you when he was on earth! He still prays for you now; the Creed says ‘He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right of the Father’ and in Romans we are told he is interceding for us (Roms 8:34).

Jesus on the night he was arrested PRAYED, that was his instinct, his default mode…to PRAY. If Jesus did that, I think we’d better be praying too. Pray for yourself, pray for those closest to you, pray for anybody and everybody! The period between Ascension Day and Pentecost (next Sunday!) is a great opportunity to refresh your prayer life…there is a worldwide initiative called ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ when we are called in particular to ‘intercede’ (literally to plead on behalf of another person) for 5 individuals to know God’s love for them in Jesus Christ. I’ve sent out some resources by email (or on the website), some of you will be using them already if not, it’s not too late to join in!

PRAY…in our Acts reading after Jesus ascended to heaven the disciples, no doubt shell shocked and confused, ‘…all joined together constantly in prayer’ (Acts 1:14). It was important for them to be HONEST in prayer. They were honest with the risen Jesus as he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit…it was good they were honest because it showed they didn’t understand what was going on. ‘Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’(v6) In other words are you going to get rid of the Romans and let Israel rule itself again? Jesus is patient in his reply, basically telling them not to fret about things they can’t control but focus on RECEIVING what God wants to give them. What he wanted to give them & us, is the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit wants to live in all his disciples so that we can be ‘witnesses’ – so that when people see a disciple of Jesus, they will see something of Jesus himself! Yes, that’s the truth; if you ‘know God’ you can’t help but show him to others in what you do and say. (The thing is you want to be the best witness you can be…that’s the subject for another sermon!)

PRAY & be HONEST in your prayers. This is particularly important in this time of uncertainty, which is also a time of opportunity…people open to looking for & RECEIVING from God. This is Mental Health Awareness Week, & its’ theme this year is ‘Kindness Matters’. That’s a great theme isn’t it…if we need anything at the moment, we need kindness! If your mental health is suffering lately, you are not alone (a great book to read is ‘Honesty Over Silence by Patrick Regan). Be kind to yourself and be kind to others. I hope, like me, you’ve been aware of many acts of kindness lately. While this virus is horrible, we have seen such kindness in neighbours looking out for one another, people sewing for the NHS etc, so many other examples…these bring glory to God; kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5 22-23).

As you pray honestly be open to RECEIVE. Jesus told his disciples that after he had ascended to the Father, he would send the Holy Spirit. We will speak more on this next Sunday (Pentecost), but I’ve been aware this last week of how God wants to speak to us…you might find that idea a bit weird! Let me give you a couple of examples. As I was taking my daily exercise in Peel Park I looked to the horizon and saw the wind turbines (over Oxenhope I think?). They looked like people with their arms outstretched as people might do when praising God. I noticed that the blades of the turbines were turning in the wind; which then converts into electricity (power). The only reason they wouldn’t turn would be if a brake was applied. It made me wonder what brakes I was applying that would stop God the Holy Spirit (often referred to as wind in the Bible) working in my life. Perhaps you might like to think about that too? The second example: I was feeling a bit fed up, I’d been praying (using a great app called Lectio 365), and God seemed to ask me a question, ‘Do you trust me?’ I let the question stay in my head hoping to find an answer…then about an hour later out of the blue somebody I don’t know well, rang me up and said I’ve been meaning to ring you because I think God wants you to know he loves you and is with you! Wow, it was just as if God was speaking to me…a reason to trust Him!

May you be confident to PRAY HONESTLY & RECEIVE from our risen and ascended king Jesus all that he wants to give you. Amen.