

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Dan Haylett. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Opening Prayer

Lord, you are our light and our salvation.

You are our hope and our strength.

We worship you today.

God the three in One, we worship you today. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Hymn: Sing to him in whom creation (Singing the Faith 14)

Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fIYNEOFTFg>

Sing to him in whom creation
found its shape and origin;
Spirit, moving on the waters
troubled by the God with;
source of breath to all things breathing,
life in whom all lives begin.

Sing to God, the close companion
of our inmost thoughts and ways;
who, in showing us his wonders,
is himself the power to gaze,
and his will, to those who listen,
by a still small voice conveys.

Holy people, priests and prophets
caught his accents, spoke his word;
his the truth behind the wisdoms
which as yet know not our Lord;
he the love of God eternal,
which in Christ was seen and heard.

Tell of how the ascended Jesus
armed a people for his own;
how a hundred men and women
turned the known world upside down,
to its dark and farthest corners
by the wind of Whitsun blown.

Pray we, then, O Lord the Spirit,
on our lives descend in might;
let your flame break out within us,
fire our hearts and clear our sight,

till, white-hot in your possession,
we, too, set the world alight.

Praise, O praise the Holy Spirit,
praise the Father, praise the Word,
source, and truth, and inspiration,
Trinity in deep accord;
through your voice which speaks within us
we your creatures own you Lord.

Michael Hewlett (1916-2000)

Let us pray together:

Holy God, in you all creation finds its shape, its freedom and its purpose. You are the source of all that we are, the very breath within us.

In Christ, you make us your companions and you call us friends. We praise you for mercy and grace poured out into our lives.

Spirit of God, comforter and joy-bringer, you empower and inspire our living, bringing strength for each day.

God, whose generous love surrounds us, we bring our worship today. Lord Jesus, at one with us, we celebrate your presence

today. Holy Spirit, transforming all creation, we welcome you within us today.

In making these prayers, we offer an acknowledgement of our need for God.

We cannot save ourselves, so loving God, forgive us for imagining we can.

We cannot control our own lives or the lives of others, so gracious God, forgive us for attempting to do so.

We cannot turn away from those around us, or from your presence in the world: as you come to us in the needs and aspirations of others. So, merciful God, forgive us for attempting to turn away.

For those who will turn to you and open themselves to the possibilities of grace, Christ offers forgiveness and hope. May our lives be changed by forgiveness, and may we be known as those who bear your love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Today's Reading from Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the

Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.”

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”²³ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias.²⁴ Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Today’s Gospel Reading: John 17:6-19

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am

not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth

Time to Reflect

If we are honest, the Ascension of Jesus is very much the poor relation in the Christian year. Lent gives way to Easter joy, and

then there's a gap until the celebration of Pentecost and the mystery of Trinity Sunday.

In the middle of it all, rather like the eccentric family member that no-one is quite sure what to make of or do with, Ascension comes along.

That is if we notice it at all. Ascension Day and the theme of ascension generally hardly looms large in our non-conformist tradition, and it's possible that we may even be a little embarrassed about such physical descriptions that seek to show how Jesus "goes up" to heaven. We feel strangely stuck in the 1st Century AD view of the layered, hierarchical universe, with God imagined as being somewhere "up there" and us "down here". Imagery and iconography around the Ascension hardly seems to help us here either: what are we to make of visitors to Mount Olivet who are invited to view Jesus' footprint on a slab of rock, imprinted before his ascension? It seems that we simply do not know what to do about the Ascension; but yet we are probably glad it's there! Jesus, risen from the dead, dies no more, and the Ascension is a theological attempt to make sense of how this might be.

The reading today from Acts follows Luke's description of the Ascension. It comes rather like the old round on the game show called "what happened next?". What happens next

matters to Luke. Luke bookends his two volumed salvation history of Luke-Acts with the Ascension, closing his Gospel account of Jesus' resurrection appearances, and now in Acts, kick-starting this new phase of how Jesus's disciples will live in the light of Easter. Ascension is necessary, even pivotal, it seems to Luke.

And in John 17 we get to listen in with the disciples to Jesus' prayer for them and for their future sanctification. Jesus' high priestly prayer is anticipating a time when he would no longer be available to the disciples in the same way that they know him now. The connectedness that we've read of in previous weeks as we reflected on the imagery of vine and branches is still very present here. Jesus has revealed the Father – and though he goes on to leave them in one sense, God's glory – through their obedience and self-giving love lives on in the world. The disciples, and us by extension, are not taken out of the "world", but given strength and remarkably joy through these experiences.

So what can we say? In the Ascension of Christ, we find a rounding off of one phase of the Son's ministry and life. The Nicene Creed is almost as reticent as we are today to say much more: "On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father". Jesus returns to the Father, and yet takes

something of our humanity with him. Everything changes – and the ascension is not simply an undoing of the Incarnation. Charles Wesley gets the balance right in his Ascension Day hymn (STF 300):

*Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!
ravished from our wistful eyes! Alleluia!
Christ, awhile to mortals given, Alleluia!
reascends his native heaven: Alleluia!*

*Him though highest heaven receives, Alleluia!
still he loves the earth he leaves; Alleluia!
Though returning to his throne, Alleluia!
Still, he calls the world his own: Alleluia!*

For Luke in Acts, and for John in the upper room, Jesus' leaving the disciples is a revelatory moment in itself. Life will never be the same through what they have endured with Jesus, and in Jesus' homecoming all that we are and face is welcomed wholeheartedly into the life of God. Jesus still "calls the world his own": our own experiences in this past year are not negated or rejected, but become somehow an offering to God, taken to God in Christ, and experienced by God.

Having said all of that, I wonder if I am making the case for the defence of the Ascension well enough yet? As good

Methodists, you may well be wondering what difference does all this make? What *practical* difference does this make to us, to the world, and to me?

I want to say in response two things. Something about what changes at the Ascension for the disciples, and then something about what is left after Jesus leaves to "reascend his native heaven".

Firstly, what changes are in view for the disciples? In John 17, in the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty before Jesus' death, he prays for protection for his disciples. That seems natural enough as they are linked with him and will face the consequences of his impending arrest and eventual death. But it stretches beyond that. The prayer is more than a prayer for protection as Jesus prays that the full measure of God's joy might be in them in such a time, and that they might be sanctified: that is made holy, set apart for God's purposes.

What's changed here? Jesus, as the high priest, has prepared all things. Disciples have been called by name, given their apprenticeship and then, with full protection (a sort of Spirit-filled PPE!) they are dedicated for the tasks that are before them.

Now, in one sense, it's over to the disciples. St. Teresa of Avila's famous words carry this idea strongly:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

But in another sense, Jesus' prayer is an indication that the whole enterprise of being the body of Christ; being salt and light; being the people of God, or however we choose to imagine it, is not squarely on our shoulders alone. Christ's calling of disciples like us, warts and all, is not (somewhat to our own amazement) a mistake. Christ's sanctifying grace prepares us and readies us for our growth through every experience we face. Christ's sending of disciples like us enables risk and transforms our weaknesses and failures. Everything changes in the light of Christ's ascension.

So, secondly, what then is left after Jesus ascends? In Acts, Luke's account of what happens after the ascension strikes us as being a rather odd piece of housekeeping. After Judas' betrayal of Jesus and his death, the 11 disciples find themselves like a football team after a red card. So,

somewhat prosaically, the disciples draw lots and find another to take Judas' place. All of this seems rather practical and strange, and yet seems significant enough to be recorded.

What is going on? We probably know that the twelve disciples stood in some way for the 12 tribes of Israel, and the practical putting back together of the group surely represents a renewed image of that completion: an opportunity to show how Easter was more than just a recovery of that which was deemed lost, but a new way of life. The 12 are restored, the band are put back together as a symbol of wholeness and unity of God's restoring life; but the relationships, and the disciples themselves are forever changed. This is not just "a new normal", but it is the basis for a stepping out into the unknown in faith.

So what's left after the Ascension? Well for the first disciples, there is a bit of waiting. Waiting for the Spirit who will come in ferocious and gentle power. Waiting for a way to share what they have seen and known to be true about their risen and ascended Lord. Waiting to be Christ's hands and feet.

What is left for the disciples seems relevant for us too. Protected, under God's gracious and self-giving love. Sanctified, made ready for the fullness of God's kingdom and sent, empowered to live as those who have been forever

changed by what we've seen and known to be true as Christ comes to us.

In the days and weeks to come, adjusting as we are to changing circumstances and renewed contact with others: how are we being put back together? In what ways will we have to wait? And what possibilities of grace are opened up for us?

Let us pray

Loving God, you put us back together when the fragments of our lives seem to be torn apart. When all is breaking, and broken and hope itself seems to have gone: you come near.

We pray today for all who cry out for wholeness, for relationships and lives to be put back together. Be in the mending, and let the healing begin.

God of Love: **Receive our prayer.**

Holy God, you bring joy out of sadness and turn the tears of the oppressed into the light of freedom. When people cry out in pain: you come near.

We pray today for all who are desperate for change for their lives and their communities. We pray for all who are forced to

rely on the kindness of others and for those who do not know who to turn to for support. We pray for all who live with fear and violence.

God of Love: **Receive our prayer.**

Gracious God, you are the source of life and the hope of nations. Where justice is done and peace is found: you come near.

We pray today for your people around the world, for those seeking answers and those simply existing. As you call us to share in your mission, we pray for all in their witness to your love.

God of Love: **Receive our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer.

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.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Hymn O for a heart to praise my God (Singing the Faith 507)

Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FyAY9fzcnU>

O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free,
a heart that always feels thy blood
so freely spilt for me;

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
my great Redeemer's throne,
where only Christ is heard to speak,
where Jesus reigns alone;

A humble, lowly, contrite heart,
believing, true and clean,
which neither life nor death can part
from him that dwells within;

A heart in every thought renewed
and full of love divine,
perfect, and right, and pure, and good,
a copy, Lord, of thine!

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
come quickly from above,
write thy new name upon my heart,
thy new, best name of love.

Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

A prayer of blessing

May God's joy be found in you as you journey on. May Christ's peace rule in your heart, and may God's Spirit renew you in love.

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with love and give you peace. Amen.