

## Sunday after Ascension Acts 1: 6-14

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

<sup>7</sup> He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

<sup>9</sup> After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

<sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

<sup>12</sup> Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk<sup>a</sup> from the city. <sup>13</sup> When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. <sup>14</sup> They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

What goes up must come down, we say. We sometimes mean this literally, and sometimes figuratively: even mighty buildings crumble eventually and those who enjoy meteoric success can eventually be humbled. It brings to mind the way that we often use the opposites up and down so figuratively. Going *up* in the world is always becoming more powerful, influential and important. It is being '*exalted*'. The Bible always equates heaven with the sky — so the heavens are *above*. You might hold an *elevated* position in government. From such a place you would have *oversight*.

Clearly, as I have just implied, the Bible works with the grain here, but also, at times subverts it. Isaiah 52:13 is part of Isaiah's songs of the suffering servant, an astounding prophecy that seems to get right so much of what would happen on the cross more than 500 years later. This verse says, 'See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.'

There is something funny going on here: it says that he, the servant, will be raised in three different ways — raised, lifted up, greatly exalted. But we know what is coming next, for next comes the suffering. Isaiah foresees that his suffering is at the same time his glory. Without saying, 'cross', Isaiah sees that he will be raised up on a cross, and instead of seeing the shame that the Romans intended for the cross, it sees only exaltation. Jesus deliberately subverts the cross from shame to exaltation, from humiliation to glorification.

But we are talking of the ascension today. In a way, therefore, the ascension is the completion of what began at the cross. The hidden king was enthroned on the cross, and Pilate had the sign 'the king of the Jews' nailed onto the cross. What he meant sardonically, Jesus owned, gloriously and his ascension fulfilled this — having risen from the dead, he rose a second time — going up to heaven to begin his rule. So the ascension is Jesus very literally *going up in the world* — raised to the place where he is recognised as the ultimate authority.

When he had gone, the disciples continued to gaze up into the clouds. They only stopped when two men in white clothes told them that Jesus would return the way he came, and by the way, why are you still looking upwards?!

It strikes me that their emotions were just the same those who wave goodbye to a loved one at the station, airport or dock, even when that going away is good. There is still a pang of loss and disappointment. Even for disciples who have seen their rabbi rise from the dead and ascend to heaven! So the angels are there to remind them that this loss is not loss exactly. Jesus is still with them, but differently; they will receive the Holy Spirit, and they will know God with power, in a new way. And furthermore, Jesus will return. So the ascension was a loss, but the cause of greater gain.

And finally there is that promise of return. Sort of like an upside down version of the prodigal son, the Son will return to us — and as Paul promises in 2 Thessalonians, we will rush to meet him, just as the Father returned to his son.

Happy endings in stories have to end in reuniting, in unity, coming together. Shakespeare is obsessive in closing his comedies with marriages — but he is only in agreement with the Bible on this — Jesus will return, and the church — the faithful — will figuratively be his bride. Jesus's return is the happy ending of the world's story, if not the end of the story, and the moment of his ascension is the moment angels come to remind us that he'll be back, and that, 'what goes up must come down' — but with no loss, only a gain of glory.

Amen.