

Acts 1:6-14 Ascension

This past Monday evening, I sat in front of my television, as I am sure many of you also did, and watched as the trouble in Washington was pushed out of the news by a terrorist attack at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, UK. My first thought was, “Oh no, the terrorists have crossed a line by making children their target, mainly young girls.” I was discouraged.

I am a hoper after peace. I believe most of the world’s problems can be resolved with compassion and justice and the display of a little humanity. I don’t really know who Ariana Grande, but I felt compassion for all those people, and instinctively knew that the terrorist also knew who would be harmed.

At the time when this happened I was working on an editorial for the Gazette about building up community (what a tall order), and listening to sermons for the summer preaching series (beginning on June 11), and thinking about the meaning of the Ascension because today is, of course, Ascension Sunday, the last in the season of Easter. Next Sunday is Pentecost, which for Christians marks the coming of the Holy Spirit.

I felt very much, at least in that moment, that we are in that time after Jesus was taken up into heaven and before the Spirit descended.

Looking Up

The story is told simply in the first chapter of the book of Acts. The believers were thinking that because Jesus had been raised it was finally time to “restore the Kingdom to Israel,” that is the way they put it, time to make things right. Instead, and it must have been a very surprising thing to hear, Jesus told them not to be concerned about such things - dates and times - 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.”

And then he disappeared into a cloud. Ever since that time Christians have spoken about the “real presence” of Christ, though Jesus is physically removed. We do not see him like we see each other. We do not hear him like we hear each other. And the world in which we bare witness is still troubled.

As they were looking at the sky they were told to stop staring and get on with life. So they went back to Jerusalem and went to the room where they had been staying. It was;

“Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and the other Judas; along with the women, Mary, and his brothers.” Is there a connection between living life and being witness?

The liturgical calendar, of course, is symbolic and gives us a chance to play out these events in time the way they happened in time. But the reality is that all our lives are lived in the time after the Holy Spirit came. We have the spiritual, but not the physical presence of Christ.

The Walk

After the intrusion of the terrorist attack in Manchester, I knew that the reporters were only going to report that story for the rest of the evening and that it was going to take some time before they knew anything much, so I went for a walk.

It was a beautiful evening; the temperature was for me not too hot or too cold, the sun was shining, the sky blue, the grass and trees green and flowers in bloom. I could see and hear children playing; there were some boys riding bicycles unsupervised; there was a trampoline with some teenagers jumping. There were people of color, and I passed a couple with a baby in a stroller and heard them speaking in a language I did

not understand nor could I even make out which language it was. It was peaceful. No one seemed threatened.

I am always aware that my life has been lived in safe places. There has been surprisingly little trouble. I thought about the people in Manchester. I thought about the terrorists. I thought about the people who are in vulnerable places.

And there are many other circumstances of vulnerability, not just the international situation, or the domestic scene, but a countless variety of situations we each face personally.

Questions

What does the Ascension mean? What does the spiritual presence of Christ mean to us all? To what do we bear witness in the world? What does this story in Acts teach us about ourselves? About God?

The Physical Absence/The Coming of the Spirit

The first thing we must do is to acknowledge the physical absence of Jesus. One thinks of the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John 17 in which he prays for his disciples on the eve of his death. He prays not only for them, but “also for those who will believe . . .

through their message,” and that means he prayed for us, not that we be taken out of the world, with all its trouble, but sanctified in it.

One also thinks of Paul when he wrote, “We regard no one from a human point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.” 2 Corinthians 5:16.

At great length in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the difference between the human, or worldly, or physical, or material way of seeing things and then contrasts with the spiritual way.

The Ascension is the point at which Christians no longer thought of Jesus from a physical point of view. The coming of the Holy Spirit, which was promised in John’s Gospel and was fulfilled at Pentecost, means the presence of God in *our* lives and in *our* world.

The Witness

We are to regard any situation in which we find ourselves from a spiritual, not a human point of view. We are told in Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I can think of no better message for us today in light of the events of this past week, and in light of the personal situations in which we live. Christ is present with us, and that presence eases our anxiety and produces the miraculous fruit of goodness.

That is our witness. We are called to community and to prayer. We are called to summon our best virtues and turn away from our darkest instincts. We are called to be good to all our neighbors.

In every facet of our lives; our health, our families, our vocations; we trust the Holy Spirit in us to give nurture and guidance, strength and wisdom, courage and compassion.

With God’s help, the inhumanity of others and the trouble in the world will not take our humanity from us. To be spiritual is to be human, ironically enough. Stop staring, and get on with the life to which you have been called.

[Back](#)[Home](#)