

Sermon – Ascension Day – 30th May 2019 – 8 pm

I wonder if you can identify with what it feels like to be stuck. Do you remember those times as a child when you were working on a maths problem and just couldn't solve it. And that plaintive cry goes up, "Mum, Dad, teacher – I'm stuck!" And of course most parents or teachers won't give the answer, but rather some clues to help solve the problem.

I remember sometimes working late into the evening in various office jobs on problems that seems intractable – only to find when I came in the next morning that what had taken several hours to get wrong the previous evening suddenly fell into place with the dawning of a new day, and a fresh mind.

There are other kinds of stuckness, too. Sometimes in relationships we can find ourselves falling into the same argument over and again. As the responses play out and we each feel justified in our view, our positions become more entrenched. It can take great courage – or sometimes a comment from a third party – to begin to see the situation in a different way which can break the deadlock.

Did you notice that wonderful passage in the description of Ascension Day in Acts of the Apostles: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" That's one such "third party" moment, because it feels to me like those experiencing the ascension have got stuck. And it's hardly surprising, really. Their teacher, leader, confidant and friend was put to death on the cross; then he miraculously appeared to them in bodily form; and now he has ascended to be with God the Father. It's quite a lot to take in, and I think we can forgive them for standing and staring.

If we freeze frame at that moment, we might be able to imagine the different things going on in each of their heads. Perhaps some felt an overwhelming sense of loss – as though they have been bereaved twice over. Others might have been perplexed and confused – be searching for answers and explanation. Perhaps some experienced anger and frustration at such a seemingly unjust series of events. Losing the person they followed would surely have left some of them wondering which direction to take.

It's a stuckness that we may be able to identify with. Times when we have felt lost; abandoned; out of our depth. We might experience that kind of feeling nationally at the moment. A sense that our political structures are creaking under the strain of Brexit. That a way forward is far from obvious. That figures of unity are hard to find. And within the church we could experience similar concerns. Watching congregations decline we might find ourselves standing and staring, unsure what to do.

And the answer from the scriptures seems to be that we need to find a way out of our stuckness – in whichever spheres of our lives. And there is some help in how we might do that. Jesus himself, before he ascended, reminded his disciples that it was not for them "to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority." This is not an injunction to blind faith, but it is a recognition that if we wait until we know everything – in any sphere of life – we shall probably find ourselves doing absolutely nothing. And in a life of faith it is a reminder that our role is not to be God, but rather to do what we can, here and now, as followers.

There is also a reminder that we continue to be learners and followers as well as witnesses. Once Jesus had died, risen and ascended, there was a crucial role for the disciples in sharing the good news – a role that we continue. And as we do so, we continue to worship and pray, knowing that

God will continue to reveal new things to us along the way. In his resurrection appearances, one of the things Jesus did over and over was open up the scriptures to his followers – showing them the ways in which they had been fulfilled and would continue to be fulfilled. We continue to be hungry for the scriptures, longing to understand the ways in which they may continue to be fulfilled. That way we seek to ensure that our actions are guided by the Holy Spirit and not our own wills.

St. Paul uses the image of Christ as the head, and us, the church, as the body to help us to visualise and understand what it means to be Jesus's disciples. Teresa of Avila extended this idea, saying, "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours." We might feel stuck sometimes, but there is work for us to do, God's work, and we are instrumental in carrying it out. In doing so we need to stay connected to God, through prayer and worship, through our fellow disciples along the way. What we can't do is keep on staring up at heaven, stuck. We might make mistakes along the way, but the call is to allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in our lives and follow wherever that leads.

Amen