



## ***Seventh Sunday of Easter***

***28 May 2017***

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## Introduction

This is the final Sunday of Easter. The forty days of the Risen Christ walking on earth have come to an end and we now mark Christ's ascension to God the Father. This is also the Sunday after the General Assembly has met in Edinburgh.

## Acts 1: 6-14

Christ's Ascension is only recorded by Luke. The key message in his Gospel about the resurrection is to declare in clear cut terms that the resurrection was a reality; that it was not some transcendent vision but that the disciples actually witnessed Jesus eating, drinking - walking and talking - that he was truly alive.

It is those real events that the disciples were called to bear witness to others about. Given this emphasis it becomes clearer as to why it is only Luke who records the ascension of Jesus in his two books Luke and Acts - it was his calling to let the world know that after the resurrection appearances Jesus' life on earth had a definite closure -that he returned to the Father.

As ever Jesus' disciples were slow on the up-take as is evidenced by their question to Jesus about whether now was the time that God's Kingdom would be restored to Israel. Despite all that had happened they remained consumed with the idea that the Kingdom of God was a political reality that would be established on earth out of God's sovereign power and might.

But Jesus never spoke about God's Kingdom in this way rather Jesus taught his followers to pray God's Kingdom's come, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven and to follow him.

In God's time, God's Kingdom will come, Jesus tells them, all that they his disciples need concern themselves with now is being his witnesses, to reveal to all people everywhere, who he is and all that he accomplished and that the Holy Spirit will come to them to fill them with power to equip them for this task.

Jesus then ascends heaven. Too much can be made of Luke's description of Jesus' ascension but what can be said is that similar events are found in the Old Testament such as Elijah being taken up to God and his power being transferred to Elisha. But what is important is not how this event



happened but that it did occur - it acts as the curtain end of scene 1 - with the two heavenly witnesses confirming that Jesus' life on earth for now is over.

When the angels speak to the disciples they are almost reproachful of them; why are you looking to heaven your work is here on earth and that has been made clear to you - but there is also reassurance in what they say - that Jesus will return.

As instructed by Jesus, the apostles return to Jerusalem to watch and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In verse 14, Luke tells us that the apostles, the women, and Jesus' own family gathered together frequently to pray. It is easy to miss in this verse the glimpse that Luke gives us of the inner life of this early Christian community that amongst them there was a spiritual unity. This is pointed to in the various translations that describes the disciples as being 'united', or 'with one accord.'

## Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35

This is a difficult Psalm to interpret – some have argued that it is a collection of opening lines of early Hebrew lyric poems and so to find any common thread in the Psalm is problematic. Whatever textual problems there are this psalm remains an intriguing read – it presents the triumphant God in two juxtaposing ways: Verses 1-3 speaks to us of the Warrior God scattering his enemies far and wide; and verses 5-10 exalts the triumph of God through his loving care for orphans, widows and the poor as well as his deliverance to safety of his people Israel.

Who is this God who is all-mighty and all powerful, a force to be reckoned with and at the same time a gentle, caring and liberating god with a special affection for the least of the world?

Verse 4 calls the people to 'prepare a way for him who rides on the clouds.' The god Baal, the god of the storm and of life giving rain in Canaanite mythology rode on the clouds but the Psalmist resolutely does not mean Baal – he is telling them that they are mistaken about Baal – what he wants is the congregation to worship and adore the Lord, whose name is *Yah* which is the ancient short form of the name Yahweh and which can be found in the old shout of praise 'Hallelujah'.

Verses 32-35 sees the Psalm rising to a crescendo of praise: just imagine the clashing of cymbals which will have accompanied these verses as the Psalmist calls for all the earth to sing praises to the



Lord, 'who rides in the sky, the ancient sky.' The Lord's power can be seen in nature but the Psalmist concludes that the Lord does not give this power and strength to nature but to his people.

The all-powerful, mighty Warrior and Loving God, gives strength to human beings – Praise indeed be to God!

## Alternative readings: Isaiah 45: 1-7 and Psalm 21: 1-7

Isaiah 45: 1-7 is an oracle addressed to Cyrus the Great, the Persian leader, who was dazzling the ancient world with his political and military success. Cyrus claimed that he had been chosen and appointed by Marduk, the leading Babylonian god, as king but here we see Isaiah's take on the matter – it is not Marduk who has commissioned Cyrus but Yahweh - as the Lord, had used Nebuchadnezzar to bring divine judgement upon Israel, the Lord was to bring divine mercy upon them through Cyrus.

Isaiah spells out that there is only the one God, and that it is Yahweh who will give Cyrus the strength that he needs to accomplish his task even though Cyrus does not recognise the Lord. And why does the Lord do this?

Verse 6-7 tell us – the Lord's actions are for universal purpose so that the whole world will know that there is no other god than Yahweh, the Creator of light and darkness, the instigator of both blessings and curses.

## Psalm 21: 1-7

This Psalm may have been composed to celebrate the victorious return of the king but the language also suggests that this was part of a liturgy of the coronation service or an annual service celebrating the king's accession to the throne.

What is paramount in this psalm, however, is not the glorification of the king but rather the vital importance of the relationship between God and the king.

Verse 3 the king does not crown himself, the king is bestowed with the crown by the Lord. All that the king has achieved is down to the Lord, verse 5 – 'His glory is great because of your help; you have given him majesty and fame.'



More wonderfully than all the earthly accolades of triumph for the king is the blessing of the Lord's presence with him forever – this brings the king 'joy' verse 6.

How does the king respond to these blessings – he trusts in the Lord and is secure. But the fact that the king trusts the Lord is not the reason why the king is secure – it is not what the king does that truly matters, it is what God does – it is because of the Lord's *hesed*, the Lord's constant love, his loving-kindness, that the king will always remain secure.

## 1 Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11

Although there is scholarly debate about the authorship and timing of Peter's first letter it is generally accepted to have been written by the Apostle Peter in Rome in circa 67 AD, in the days following the first major persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero. The recipients of this letter were a wide-ranging number of districts in the North-East corner of Asia Minor. They embraced a large geographical area which was heavily populated thus demonstrating how far and wide the missionary activity of the early church had come.

The first major persecutions of Christian by Nero came about after the massive fire of Rome in 64 AD, the one in which popular legend has Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burned – but the fiddle was not invented until the 10<sup>th</sup> century so it is an anachronism! That aside, Nero used the Christians as a scapegoat for the fire of Rome – the persecution that they suffered was horrendous. Tacitus wrote:

'Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts they were torn by dogs and perished or were nailed to crosses or were doomed to the flames and burned to serve as a nightly illumination when daylight had expired.'

Although this terror eventually died down, the tide had turned against Christians, they were no longer tolerated by Rome and so persecutions of Christians became common place all across the Roman empire. It is into this context which Peter is writing.

In verses 12-14 Peter states that he considers persecution as an inevitability for followers of Christ. Why? Because Christians were to live by the standards of Jesus Christ and not the standards of the world which meant they stood out from the crowd. Goodness, kindness, selflessness, forgiveness,



peace and harmony are values and actions which the world so often finds hard to fathom. To be a Christian is to be one who has ‘the glorious Spirit, the Spirit of God’ resting upon you, it means being different to others and the world does not like those who are different hence suffering follows.

Peter’s exhortation to his fellow Christians to be glad to suffer as they are sharing in Christ’s suffering does not rest easily with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we live in an age of suicide bombers and listen to extremists glorifying their martyrs. But Peter is not glorifying suffering for suffering’s sake nor is he advocating self-inflicted suffering but rather he is pastorally concerned for God’s people – he wants them to know that such things are to be expected and to give them hope in the darkness.

In chapter 5 verses 6-11, Peter goes onto to teach them to remain humble - as St Augustine wrote–  
 “Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility”

In other words, stay grounded, and trust that God is with you but in doing that Peter explains, they need to be alert to the temptation of the evil one who will try to persuade them to walk away from God. You can almost hear the devil’s voice saying: ‘if God in Christ was really with you then you would not be suffering as you do.’

Ever the pastor, Peter encourages his audience by telling them to remember that they are not alone – that their fellow believers all around the world are also experiencing hard times – it is not just happening to them it is happening to us.

Verse 10 speaks then of God’s grace, of the gift of strength, and a sure footing that will be theirs in due course. Cold comfort? Or a clarion call to trust in the One true God who through Christ has lived and experienced the harsh realities that earthly life so often brings?

## John 17: 1-11

Christ is with his disciples - the time is almost nigh, darkness surrounds them, the atmosphere is tense, the mood sombre – but he still has some final important lessons to impart to his disciples before he rises up and walks his last journey to the cross.



Looking upwards to heaven, Jesus prays to his Father, to our Father, 'the hour has come'. But Jesus has no martyr complex, he has no desire for personal gain, or status, or praise all he desires is that what is to befall him brings glory to God.

In this prayer, Jesus reminds us that God has given him, his Son, complete authority over all humanity so that all whom God gives him will receive 'eternal life.'

And what is 'eternal life'? It is not some add on after we die, a reward for 'good' behaviour but rather it is the joy, the blessing, the peace of knowing God as the one true God and knowing that Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent.

Eternal life is about a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ; it is about coming home to the source of all life. As St Augustine said: "O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Jesus knows that his work on earth is done; he has taught his disciples all that God asked him to and they have followed him by obeying God's word – they know who he is – that he is God's Son, God himself.

Speaking then of his imminent death, Jesus prays for his disciples who are to remain there on earth after he has returned to God the Father and Christ is concerned for them. 'Keep them safe' he implores, for they have an ongoing task to do – they are to bear witness to his life, to his death, to his resurrection – to the message that God in Christ brings love, forgiveness, healing, peace and hope to all humanity.

Jesus knows that the world will not receive the message he has entrusted to his disciples with open arms – he knows that they will suffer for Him but they are to remain in the world for they have been commissioned with a God-given task to do, to spread the Good News of Christ.

To accomplish this task, Jesus also prays that his disciples will be one, just as he is one with the Father. Why? It is quite simple and I quote Rev Professor William Barclay:

"Where there are divisions, there is exclusiveness, where there is competition between the churches, the cause of Christianity is harmed and the prayer of Jesus frustrated. The gospel cannot be truly preached in any congregation which is not a united band of brothers and sisters. The world cannot be evangelised by competing churches."



## Sermon ideas

There are many themes running through the readings: you could take the reference to spiritual unity in the Acts passage and Christ's prayer that his followers be one or look at Peter's letter and explore questions such as these: does Christian persecution happen in Scotland today? What does it look like? Do we really suffer? and how should we handle it?

I am focusing, however, upon the passages in Acts and in John's Gospel but underneath are the themes which are present in the Old Testament readings and in Peter's letter that the Mighty God out of his grace equips all he calls to undertake his work.

Christ's ascension is a tricky subject in our post-Christian age – the leap of faith in the resurrection may have been made but the idea of Jesus being spirited up heavenward in front of the disciples' eyes seems more the stuff of magic and myth! This is because we have become, today, rather fixated with the notion that 'facts' equal 'truth' – for something to be true it must be factually correct and if we cannot establish the literal facts then the matter in question must not be true.

This narrow outlook blinds us: it has turned truth into a fundamentalist subject which limits us rather than liberates us. The bible is not concerned with the question about 'how' something happened but rather its focus is upon 'why' something has happened. We do not need to become bogged down with how Jesus ascended to heaven but rather we need to concentrate upon the question of why was it vital to Luke to record that Jesus' risen earthly life came to an end.

Jesus' ascension transforms the particular story about Jesus Christ into a universal one – it ensures that Jesus is not left to a particular time or place in human history; it affirms God's glorious work of the resurrection and means that we, in this time and in this place, can know the Risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke does not linger on the ascension itself but instead swiftly calls the disciples to return their focus to earth for here there was work to be done.

Mission is at the heart of Luke's account of the ascension – Christ's mission to his disciples to spread the Good News to all corners of the earth, the Good News that through Christ people are blessed with eternal life.



This task is an onerous one as Christ acknowledges in his prayer to God the Father in John's Gospel but his disciples will be strengthened and equipped for their calling.

Peter takes up this theme in his letter – followers of Christ can expect to suffer but God in Christ is present with them to grant them 'firmness, strength and a sure foundation'.

This is the grace of God, the Mighty God, the Warrior God, the Creator of all that is seen and unseen, the master of light and darkness whose *hesed* – his loving-kindness blesses and equips all he calls to undertake his God-given task.

We as the Church our God in Christ's agent in this world – we, like those first motley crew of disciples have a calling to fulfil - we are not to look heavenward but down into the reality of this earth to bring the Good News of Christ to all people – especially, as the Psalmist reminds us, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable.

And we are to do this together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, - as Christ prayed:

'And now I am coming to you; I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me so that they may be one just as you and I are one.' (John 17: 11)

Are we one in Christ in the Church today?

## Time with Children

1. A bit of fun! Get a helium balloon and tie the end to a reel of cotton and put it into a box. Tell the story that today we are remembering that the Risen Jesus returned to God the Father after spending 40 days with his disciples. Then present the children with the box and ask them to open it. If your sanctuary has a high ceiling all the better as the balloon will float far above everyone's heads – everyone will be looking at the balloon and wondering how on earth you will retrieve it!
2. Then tell them what the angels said – why are you looking up at the sky? Like the first disciples we are not to focus upon heaven but upon our mission to tell all the world about who Jesus is – you could tell them the story written by Rev George Macleod, founder of the Iona Community:



There is a very old legend and all legends that persist speak truth. It concerns the return of our Lord Jesus to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the city.

"Lord this is a great salvation that thou hast wrought," said the angel

But the Lord Jesus only said 'Yes'.

"What plans hast thou made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what thou hast done?" asked Gabriel.

"I left Peter and James and Martha and Mary to tell their friends and their friends to tell their friends until all the world should know."

"But Lord Jesus," said Gabriel, "suppose Peter is too busy with his nets or Martha with her housework or the friends they tell are too occupied and forget to tell their friends - what then?"

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once then he said in his quiet wonderful voice: "I have not made any other plans I am counting on them."

## Prayers

### **Prayers of Approach, Confession & the Lord's Prayer**

Almighty & Everlasting God,  
all powerful, and unchanging, ever faithful and constant in love,  
we bow our heads to worship you Sovereign Lord,  
for you are our Creator and our souls are restless until they return home to you.

We praise you for your gracious love that gave this world,  
that gave us your Son our Lord Jesus Christ – Immanuel, God with us...

Although, we were not there at the stable like the shepherds and the wise men;  
although we were not one of the 12 apostles;  
nor did we see Jesus heal the sick, or give sight to the blind;  
nor were we there when he broke bread in an upper room  
or when they pressed the crown of thorns into his head or when he hung dying on a wooden cross;  
nor did we see the empty tomb



or share fish with the Risen Christ on the beach  
or watch him ascend to your right hand  
We still know through the power of the Holy Spirit  
that Jesus Christ's living presence is with us –  
that he is by our side and that he is the same today as he was yesterday,  
as he was 2000 years ago and as he will be tomorrow.

Merciful God forgive us for forgetting to stop and be still each day  
to bask in the warmth of your Son's unchanging presence with us –  
a presence that gives us strength for our daily tasks,  
that gives us peace which we can then share with others  
and that gives us the light of hope to shine upon our world.

In the name of Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord, we pray for mercy –  
wash over us with your love so that we may begin again –  
help us to hear the Good News of Christ –  
that through him and because of him our sins are forgiven!

Thanks be to God

Cleansed and renewed let us join together to say the Lord's Prayer  
Our Father who art in heaven...

### **Prayers of Thanksgiving & Intercession**

Creator God, we thank you for all that you give us –  
for faith that gives us hope and strength particularly in times of trial,  
for love that is at the heart of all your purposes  
and for the fellowship we share together as members of your Church,  
the body of Christ here on earth, a place where we can belong,  
where we can be accepted and valued as you have created us, for we are all your children.



Loving God, may your Holy Spirit wash over us all and melt even the hardest of hearts to see that the barriers which divide each and every one of your children on earth are barriers of human making.

Help us to see the face of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ in the eyes of all whom we meet – for no one is outside the covenant of his grace and love.

Jesus said; blessed are the peacemakers – we pray for all who are working to bring peace and reconciliation between nations, between communities and between families.

Help us all to bring peace wherever we go so that your Kingdom of Shalom may be seen as a reality that can be lived here on earth.

We pray for all people across your world who are suffering today because of prejudice and ignorance, - the lepers of our day – we also pray for the millions upon millions of people whose God-given human dignity is also eroded because of the unjust structures which govern our world – structures which mean that so many of our brothers and sisters around our world are living in squalor.

We remember those who are ill, those who are anxious about hospital tests and treatment that are to come and those who are caring for loved ones who are ill whether at home or in hospital.

May they all know in their darkest moments that you are with them ready and waiting to give them strength and encouragement.

We pray for all who are grieving the loss of a loved one whether it be a recent bereavement or one which took place a long time ago – in the pain of their loss may they know, dear God, the comfort of your love.

We pray for your Church set in the world to show how people belong together and how your gifts are given to be shared.



Grant that as we feel for those who are rejected and silenced  
we may meet Christ in them and bear witness to his transforming love.

As we go about our daily lives this week, Good and Gracious God, be our shepherd and our guide:  
lead us out of darkness and death and into life and light eternal;  
deliver us from evil, guide us into your ways of goodness and peace  
and when we wander bring us back to you and your love through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you O Father and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forevermore.  
Amen



## Musical suggestions

- CH4 63 All people that on earth do dwell – opening praise that sings of God’s goodness to us
- CH4 442 Blessing and honour, glory and power - Christ’s Kingdom shall reign over all the earth
- CH4 416 Christ is alive! Let Christians sing – Christ is no longer bound to a distant past
- CH4 167 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah – God is our strength and our guide as we live here on earth
- CH4 448 Lord, the light of your love is shining – may our lives reveal the story of who Christ is
- CH4 461 How sweet the name of Jesus sounds – the rock with boundless stores of grace upon which we can rely
- CH4 522 The Church is wherever God’s people are praising – the mission of the church
- CH4 542 Lord, speak to me, that I may speak – seeking strength to reveal Christ to others
- CH4 513 Courage brother! Do not stumble – trusting in God and doing what is right
- CH4 468 Son of God, eternal Saviour – the prayer that God’s people should be one



## Additional Resources

**Pray Now** is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers.

*Word of Life* is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



### SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the

Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading

Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

### Quick Guide...



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

*The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Fiona Smith for providing us with this material.*

*Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.*



The Church of Scotland

Mission and Discipleship Council

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