

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 16 May 2021

*Lord God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

### ***The Ascension of Jesus and our spiritual maturity***

The story of Jesus' ascension marks the end of Jesus' appearance to disciples after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today we'll read the ascension as a way of growing to spiritual maturity of the believers. In the process of being mature, there may be a turning point that helps us depart from the old life and enter a new one. We see such examples in nature too. In the case of birds, when time comes, a fledgling bird will leave the nest to live their own lives. But it will kill them when it happens too early, as they haven't developed their wings mature enough. When they stay too long in the nest, they are also in danger as their nests are the very targets of predators.

However, spiritual maturity in relation to the ascension of Jesus is done differently. It offers believers to begin a new chapter of life. At the same time, it also offers ongoing care for them through the Holy Spirit. What we will learn from the two readings is that disciples/believers will understand who Jesus was and what the promise of the Father was. It enables them to understand the scriptures as the Holy Spirit will empower them to maturity.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it will help them to be witness to the world and to continue worship in Christ.

### ***Understanding who Jesus is***

Before the ascension, Jesus makes the disciples understand who he is. He says that everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> Here Luke used the word 'must/it is necessary' – *dei*. Luke often used the word 'must' – *dei* showing that certain things 'must' take place for God's greater purposes.<sup>2</sup> That is, everything is planned by God, so things promised by God will surely be accomplished. Next, Jesus opens their minds

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:44

to understand the scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Again, understanding the scriptures means understanding the person Jesus and his work as a whole. For Jesus, it was crucial as he was the example of the spiritual maturity that they were to become. As it was also promised by God,<sup>4</sup> the coming of the Spirit<sup>5</sup> will enable the disciples to bear witness effectively.<sup>6</sup> Then they will be able to testify what God has done through the work of Jesus and what will be done by the Holy Spirit.

### ***Being empowered by the Holy Spirit***

In Acts 1:1-11, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will make the life of the church in new ways for two times.<sup>7</sup> These new ways are quite different from the work of the Spirit in the past. In the Old Testament, for example, the ‘spirit of God’ was used to show how God was guiding and being present in human life. For instance, in 1 Samuel 11:6, it reads, “And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled.” That is, the Spirit empowers Saul to avenge Israel on the Ammonite. But again, in 1 Samuel 16:14, this same Spirit leaves Saul, leaving him in the hands of the evil spirit that was also sent by God.<sup>8</sup> But today’s reading in Acts 1:5 and 8, shows the new dimension of the Spirit’s work. Here the work of the Spirit is different from the ordinary water of baptism. It is also different from what has gone before as the transcendent kingdom of God that is different from the political kingdom of David and his descendants.

What the Spirit will do is to empower the believers so that they can be mature in learning and teaching scriptures for one another, and continuing the work of Jesus. For Luke, the Spirit empowers the church for its mission in the world. That is, the Holy Spirit has moved the church into areas in which it otherwise would not have gone, and into activities in which it otherwise would not have engaged. Power disturbs, and yet it is not usually until afterwards in reflection that we relate disturbances to the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:45

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24:49

<sup>5</sup> Luke 11:13; 12:11-12; Acts 1:4-8

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:18-19; 12:11-12; Acts 4:31

<sup>7</sup> Acts 1:5, 8

<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 16:14 David Plays the Lyre for Saul - Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.

### *Becoming witness and continuing worship*

Now Jesus turns the focus next to his followers as they will be witnesses of these things.<sup>9</sup> For us, the word ‘witness’ may imply merely our experiences as eyewitness. But for the readers with Acts would have known that being Jesus’ witnesses would not be simply a spectator. In Acts, ‘witness’ is for the call to testify about Jesus to ‘the end of the earth.’<sup>10</sup>

But the call to be a witness doesn’t go alone but together with worship. Like a flower bud that will not bloom without watering, the renewal of worship, the singing of hymns, the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, the reading and exposition of scripture, and the breaking of bread keep the church in touch with the promised power of God. It also makes it possible to glorify and enjoy God in and outside of the church. It is because worship becomes the occasion when the story that must be told and retold among the nations is heard afresh. It is when the witness to the world is re-envisioned. In turn, worship without witness is empty. In this case, the church merely turns in on itself, loses its reason for being, and finds its singing, praying, and reading of scripture bland and powerless.

In our storytime, we heard the story titled, ‘the Dot,’ and the question was, ‘What helped Vashti draw rich, mature dots in the end?’ We may think of her teacher first who encouraged Vashti to draw the simplest thing – a dot. When she did it half-heartedly, the teacher then asked her to sign on it. Signing on it made it unique as it showed the dot belonged to Vashti, no one else. Next, the teacher put her dot in a very fancy frame. She didn’t realize what her dot looked like until she saw it with her sign in the frame. By this time, we may find a few possible answers to the question, “what helped Vashti draw rich, mature dots in the end?” One may be the excellent teacher; another may be the signing her name on the page; another the gold frame; another may be everything that was said so far.

From the biblical perspectives, when is the ascension moment – a moment of growing to maturity in this story then? One possible answer may be like this: when Vashti saw the dot in the frame, she thought that she could do it better. Then all the experimental work began. During this period, Vashti revealed her creativity that had been there all the time. It can be compared to the work of the Spirit in faith journey as these experiments helped her develop her creativity and be matured. As the story unfolds, at the school art show, Vashti was able to help a boy who

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:48

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1:8, 10:39, 13:31 etc.

thought he couldn't even draw a straight line with a ruler. She asked him to draw a line and sign on it, and that became another new beginning. Isn't it similar to the story of the disciples who continued the work of Jesus after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit? From the story, we may be able to say that Vashti will continue to draw many more things, and her creativity will be mature as time goes by.

What does this tell us today, then? We have many tasks to make this faith community live and community friendly. Sometimes we may feel tired. But is it because of the past experiences make us disappointed? Does it make us feel things unchanged? But time and time again, God says that there is no such thing as to remain unchanged for those who are living in the Spirit of God. Every day is a new day, and we are expected to live this faith life creatively. As if a simple one dot was enough to change many others, we'd like to draw our simple dot every day. In the end, in God's time, we will surely draw rich, mature dots that will also change others' clumsy lines too. It will help to grow our faith to the maturity to the measure of the full stature of Christ as living witness through the worship to which our whole being is committed. Amen!