



Highfield Rd Uniting Church
John 17: 20 – 26 We are witnesses

It is our task to make known to the world that God has come near to us in Jesus the Christ, bringing grace and calling us to love. Luke gives us stories of Jesus ascending to be with God and telling the disciples that they are to be witnesses. John gives us Jesus talking to the disciples at that last meal and telling them that they are to make it known that Jesus is one with God. This is much more than me trying to jam two sets of readings into one service! This is the realisation that Luke and John are not as different as we first think. Luke presents us with stories of Jesus and the disciples; stories loaded with meaning and purpose. John presents us with all those meanings thought over and digested and turned into teachings on the lips of Jesus. Luke gives us Jesus bidding the disciples farewell on a hill in Bethany. John gives us Jesus bidding his disciples farewell around a table in Jerusalem. In both cases the farewell is not just “I am leaving”, it is “I am leaving, and you are to take up my mission.”

If I was to give you a scorecard of all the Christian feasts in the year and ask you rank them – Image – where would you place Ascension?

After the Big 4, there are a few celebrations that some people attached importance to for their own spiritual life – Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday – but our tradition doesn’t place a lot of importance on the others. And I’m sure Ascension wouldn’t rate very high on anyone’s list. After all it isn’t a Sunday, it isn’t a holiday, it’s always on a Thursday, and, to be honest, it’s a bit fanciful. And yet, when you take away the Jesus floating in the air bit, this is an important festival – “You are witnesses” – this is our mission! Just about all the festivals in the Christian Year are about Jesus, obviously, but there are two – Pentecost and Ascension – that are about us. And they are both about the same important point – Jesus is gone, we are to follow him and carry on the mission and ministry. We are to make known that God has come close in grace through Jesus the Christ and calls us to love.

Maybe it’s the rather hard to picture, fanciful nature of the Ascension that led John to put the same message into a farewell speech around the table. After all, the table is the meeting place of the community and the place of being with Jesus. At the table is a great place to emphasise to the community that Jesus may be gone from us physically, but he is present spiritually and still calling us to follow on that important mission to make the God of grace and love known to the world. The God of Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah has come close in Jesus to open a way of faith, hope and love. Luke wanted his readers to carry on the task of being witnesses to Jesus as more than a teacher or prophet; Jesus was the promised one who was with God and has returned to be with God. John wanted his readers to carry on the task of making that same point known; that Jesus was the one sent by God. However, John has something more in mind as well; making Jesus known was about more than witnessing, more than telling or words. We are to make Jesus known as the one sent by God through our living of a life of mutual love. Our unity in love is a witness to, and expression of, the unity of God, Father and Son. We may not be unified into one Christian church, one theology or one hierarchy; but if each and every community is preaching and living the one Gospel, the one way of grace and love, then our unity can be a witness to, and expression of the unity that was shown in Jesus living out the will of God in teaching, healing and welcoming.

For many, the Ascension is no big deal, theologically; it is the natural follow up to the Incarnation. If Jesus came from God, then he would return to God. The big deal is that this is not a one-off event, like a prophet with a message or a leader with a task. This is an ongoing event in which we are swept up in that ongoing mission of making the love of God known and lived. Jesus prayed not just for the gathered disciples but for all those who would come to know the grace of God through their ministry. The Ascension is not just a farewell, it is divine succession planning. As Jesus made the God of grace and love known, so we are called into that task. Not on our own, or in our own strength, but as followers and representatives and ambassadors. John was right to take the message of the Ascension into a discourse and a prayer because the Ascension is not just an historic event, it is an ongoing regeneration of the will of God. Generation upon generation, new people hear the call and see the love in action and get caught up in the divine mission to make God's love in Jesus the Christ known and lived.

We are witnesses and we are living examples that this love that we share and this message of grace that we have does not come from us or from some philosophy but from the reality that in Jesus, God came close to us and welcomed us into the divine world of love. We follow Jesus, the Christ, who was from God and in returning to God, has called us to follow the way of grace and love. Amen

Rev Ross Pearce

Reflect and Rate for yourself the Christian Feasts and Festivals

Good Friday	
Jesus Baptism	
Christmas Day	
Pentecost	
Ash Wednesday	
Ascension Day	
Trinity	
Maundy Thursday	
Church Anniversary	
Christ the King	
Transfiguration	
Epiphany	
Holy Name of Jesus	
Palm Sunday	
Easter Day	
Annunciation	