

Leavening Church

Jesus's roadmap (Louise Hampson)

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, the day when Jesus went up into heaven and was seen on earth no more. It must have been an incredible sight for the disciples, who had only just started to get used to having Jesus around again after his crucifixion. In many of the very literal medieval representations of the Ascension in our cathedrals and churches you see the bottom of two feet disappearing into a swirl of cloud as a ring of astonished faces look up. On some there are even two little footprints left on the ground beneath to make the point that this was flesh and blood being bodily taken up into heaven.

Of course in the Bible descriptions of Jesus' reappearance after his crucifixion it is very unclear exactly what physical form he took – there are many references to his suddenly appearing and disappearing, to his being unrecognised by those who knew him well, and of course the famous instruction he gives to Mary in the garden, "Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to my Father". This is a period of great turmoil and uncertainty for the disciples who are being led towards a time when they will have to go it alone, without Jesus amongst them, and do what he has instructed them to do. It must have been the spiritual equivalent of taking the stabilisers off the bike and endeavouring to stay upright. How many parents have run behind a bike saying "It's okay, I'm still holding on" to give their child confidence when in fact they have already let go? The child believes they are being held so has the confidence to keep pedalling; the parent knows they have to let go and trust that the child will keep going by themselves otherwise they will never take that leap.

Tomorrow, 17th May, is another step towards letting go of the stabilisers which have held us all prisoner in an attempt to keep us safe. Each step on the 'roadmap' is caveated with the possibility that it could all be reversed if things go wrong, a dreadful balancing act between trying to avoid the terrible impact of Covid vs the terrible impacts of the lockdowns manifest in loneliness, mental health issues, economic damage and family stress. We look forward to regaining freedoms we once took for granted but are cautious of doing too much too soon and it all going wrong again. In some ways, the disciples must have felt much the same. They had been given their roadmap by Jesus ahead of his departure and had practical things to address, like who was going to take the place of Judas in the twelve (clearly being 12 they had decided was important, maybe a way of giving themselves a sense of order and control!). But they must also have been very conscious that they were in effect 'going it alone', that there was no going back because their leader had left. If they failed to carry out his instructions he was not going to reappear and give them another chance, to grab onto the back of the saddle if he saw them wobbling, they had to deal with life without his physical presence.

Of course, we know the next chapter in the story, that they would be given the amazing gift of the Holy Spirit to equip them to do the work required and that their words would set up the church across the world. But they didn't know that: right now, for them, they are in another 'between time', the 'what do we do now?' period between an incredible disappearance (this time not the heartbreak of the crucifixion) and the bestowing of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells them they are chosen and tells them what to do. We are chosen by God because we have said we want to be guided by his will. We too are in an 'in-between' time, between the Ascension and the promised Second Coming, and like the disciples we don't know how long this will last or what the next chapter in the story will really be, so like them we must simply get on with doing what God has told us to do, pedalling like mad to do his will trusting that he holds on to the back of the saddle!