

## St James' Church, Weybridge

### Eve of Ascension 2024 – Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> May

#### **First Reading** Acts 1:1-11

St Luke's description of the events surrounding the Ascension give us both reassurance of the future and an outline instruction for all disciples of Jesus.

#### **Gospel** Luke 24:44-end

We are heirs of the promises made to his disciples. Jesus reassures us today that our vocation to continue the work he started will be supported by the power of God, we too are so blessed.

#### **HOMILY**

*"Then he led them out as far as Bethany and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them."* (Luke 24:50)

I recall a discussion at a previous confirmation group around the Ascension of Jesus in which I had asked for people to sum up their understanding of the Gospels in one sentence. One said, *"Well, it just seems like a lot of comings and goings."* He explained that nobody seemed to stay in one place, always moving from town to town: Jesus going to and from Jerusalem, the disciples disappearing off, fishing for one! So, the journey up a hill before Jesus Ascended into heaven made sense really... This led to quite an interesting discussion, *"Why didn't Jesus just set up his 'church' in one place and bring people to it, as is the case now?"* So, is church as we know it today – quite static and fixed, what Jesus really intended? Or are we supposed to be mobile, on a pilgrimage of change and transformation?

In our church tradition we often speak of our faith journey as being akin to pilgrimage, a metaphor for faith-travel. Often pilgrimage can lead to great change as well as challenge in our thinking and deepening of faith. Indeed you may have watched the television series entitled pilgrimage, in which celebrities journey together, learning more about their faith, that if others and so much more along the way, often finding friendships with people they may otherwise have never had the chance to meet and engage with.

So, what does it mean for us and our pilgrimage of faith, to be people of change? And how does our understanding of gathered church fit with the Gospel call of Christ Jesus to meet others where they are, along the way?

We are told in today's Gospel that Jesus led the disciples *"out as far as Bethany"* before he ascended and left them. Perhaps they didn't realise this was to be a last journey before he left them. After all, Jesus had led them and sent them off in different directions during the previous three years, seeking the lost, preaching God's word, going out into the world to find people where they were. This journey was familiar, the route towards the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, no less. And Jesus had prepared them for Ascension, by reminding them again of the prophecies concerning himself throughout history.

So, Jesus and his disciples journey together one last time and they climb a hill - another reminder of Jesus relationship within the Trinity, just like the Transfiguration. We can only imagine their feelings! Jesus blessed them, as on other occasions, before a journey or before sleeping. Then he is physically gone.

This moment of pilgrimage with the Lord is not the end of a journey but rather the beginning of something new, dynamic and exciting, for Our Lord promises to be with them, and therefore us, until the end of time. The church, His body, us gathered here in Weybridge engaged in a pilgrimage of challenge and change.

Nothing could prevent their communion with him whenever they called upon him and met to break the bread, as we do in our own church community. Wherever they went and whatever they did, they would be accompanied by the Lord. His Advocate, the promised Spirit of Pentecost would later baptise the Church with power from on high and give them, as us today, the words, the strength and the inspiration needed to carry out the responsibilities of discipleship.

Like the disciples before us, we Christians are a pilgrim people: it is who we are and what we do as the Church today in Weybridge. We, like all Apostles, are sent out – to proclaim Jesus, to declare his promise of a love that calls forth the best in us and brings forgiveness and reconciliation, which leads to eternal life. The difficult truth is that our Christian faith, like life itself, is not static, safe and effortless. We are on a journey – a pilgrimage – and change is required along the way.

In our worship, as Jesus meets us in the holy Sacrament off the Altar, we can experience times of interior stillness, the peace which Jesus promised as he is with us; but our joyful task in the world is to be his hands, informed by his teaching, in a world where his love is needed more than ever. His reassurance to us is the same as that given to the Gospel disciples. He will never leave us. And the world needs those active hands of peace, reconciliation, hope and new life more than ever.

If we want to join Jesus on that mountain to see his glory we are asked to (even metaphorically) trudge the highways of life as his disciples of the Gospel today, in order to change the world for him. And the same joy awaits us too. Amen.

*Father Damian Harrison-Miles, May 2024*