**Sermon** Sunday 17 May 2015

Lessons Acts 1: 1 – 11 Ephesians 1: 15 – 23 St Luke 24: 44 – 53

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Holy God, Your Spirit saturates this sanctuary, envelops us and fills ours souls to overflowing. In our stillness, may we be attentive to Your Presence, listen for Your silence, and let Your tender transcendence transfigure our entire being. Easter is within us; raise us to new heights. Amen.

‘Unrepentant, uncaring and untouched’ are the words used to describe Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the 21 year old man convicted of the Boston bombing. Sentenced to the death penalty, Tsarnaev, the victims and the relatives of the deceased may now face years of waiting before what seems like an inevitable outcome. *The Times* reports that public support in the United States for the death penalty is falling. During the trial, the court heard harrowing accounts of carnage. Last week, Roman Catholic bishops in Massachusetts expressed their opposition to the death penalty, citing the words of Pope Francis, who said that such a sentence is ‘an offence against the inviolability of life.’

In Iraq, Islamic State forces are on the point of seizing the city of Ramadi, with the help of suicide bombers, at least one of whom was British. In Syria, Isis forces have advanced to the ancient city of Palmyra, a place of great archaeological significance. According to the Syria Observatory for Human Rights, 23 people were killed there this week.

In recent weeks, we have been overwhelmed with images of suffering in earthquake-hit Nepal. In our own lives, we may face suffering through personal bad news, the diagnosis of an illness, the loss of a loved one, a troubled relationship, a damaging and demeaning environment at work, or stress and unhappiness because everything we are living through, taken together, is just too much all at the same time. Life can be pretty brutal, hurtful: our disappointments can be shattering and people whom we thought we could trust let us down for their own gain and aggrandizement. This is the world we live in, one perspective at least. These are some of the things we bring into God’s House, into this sanctuary of peace; these are some of the things that we lift up before God in prayer.

Today is Ascension Sunday, one of the highlights of the Church’s liturgical calendar. It is today that we reflect upon the myth – the faith narrative – of the lifting up of Jesus, the Risen Christ, into heaven. In the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, along with the disciples, we look heavenward as Jesus is carried up and a cloud takes Him out of our sight. In the New Testament Book of Ephesians, we are told that raised and ascended, Christ is seated at the right hand of God, ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion….’ The writer says, Christ ‘fills all in all’.

If we allow ourselves to meditate on the ascension of Jesus, let go of our ‘rational’ mind and, for a moment, let ourselves be drawn up with Him into the cloud, into the heavenly places, it is a breath-taking euphoric vision. In the rich language of Jewish mythology, Jesus is embraced by the Father, at one with the Eternal Lover. The imagery is of union, intimacy and spiritual marriage. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the writer extends that embrace, the inter-penetration of human and divine, saying that in Christ God gathers all things, in heaven and on earth. It is as if God puts His arms around the entire universe, around all that is. We should not fall at the first hurdle, stumble at any literal interpretation of these ancient stories. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into them, Scripture becomes for us a sacrament, a gateway into the Divine.

Ascension is a mystical experience. We find it in a number of places. Within Judaism, we see the ascension of Enoch and Elijah while, within Islam, the ascension of Muhammad, occurring as it does in a nighttime dream, is not dissimilar to that of Jacob’s Ladder. Ascension is also found in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, in the mysteries of Mithras, Islamic mysticism and Dante’s vision. In ancient Britain, it was a custom that, when a guest retired for the evening, the host would say a blessing, ‘May God send you a dream.’ In the Celtic world, as in that of the biblical world, it was understood that God ‘spoke’ through dreams, images, feelings and visions.

Since the Enlightenment, we’ve become excessively rational and dismissed the vital importance of intuition. We tell ourselves that we daren’t trust our deepest spiritual yearnings. The pilgrimage of the inner life is the most important journey we can make in life, and we need to learn again to listen to the Holy within us. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the writer speaks of the ‘eyes of the heart’ being ‘enlightened’. All the philosophical theology of the Church is secondary; at its root, religion is an inner encounter with the Eternal, that sense that we walk with God and that God’s providential hand is upon us, gently guiding us, present with us always.

In Scotland, as elsewhere in the West, the future of spirituality does not lie in doctrinal hand-outs, in defining ourselves as having superiority over the spiritual experiences of other Christians or other faiths, but rather in the meeting of minds, the sharing of experiences, the foregoing of ecclesiastical status, the acceptance of person to person encounters and the sitting alongside our fellow travellers. Are we in Scotland, in the Church of Scotland, open to honouring the Divine in others, all others? All religions are an attempt to capture in human understanding and language the Mystery of the universe, the Author of the ‘Big Bang’, the still, small voice, the Holy One, hidden in all things.

The ancient faith narrative of the Ascension poetically, mystically encapsulates the sense that God’s purpose for us is completion, fulfillment and healing. If we stand with the disciples, if we watch as they did, what do we see? We see One we know being lifted up, one we know who loves us, unconditionally. As we gaze, we too are drawn upward, inward; we too are held by the Father. Fleetingly, we too may listen to the silent conversation, the ‘table talk’ of the Trinity.

The abiding image, the lasting sensation, of the story of the Ascension is that of love. Let’s not ever get bogged down in thinking that heaven and hell are geographical places. From the Eastern Orthodox Church, as a critique of a belief in hell, there is a story told of St Silouan. Silouan was in conversation with a hermit, who believed that God would punish all atheists. The hermit said, ‘They will burn in everlasting fire.’ St Silouan said, ‘Tell me, supposing you went to paradise, and there looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire. Would you be happy?’ The hermit said, ‘It can’t be helped. It would be their own fault.’ With sorrow in his eyes, Silouan replied, ‘Love could not bear that. We must pray for all.’ The word ‘hell’ does not appear in the writings of Paul or in the Gospel of St John.

This life is not about retributive justice, about God punishing us for our wrongs, puny or otherwise. What kind of God is that? God is not a petty tyrant, but our Eternal Lover. The imparting of God’s self to us is our atonement. Pope John Paul II said that the greatest gift to the churches of the West is the doctrine of *theosis*: it is our deification, divinization, our communion, our participation in the nature of God. Who would want to go to a heaven of a God who sent people to hell? The purpose of the inner life is the opportunity for spiritual growth, for our maturation beyond the small self, beyond our selfishness, hypocrisy and destructiveness. The greatest of the Early Church Fathers, Origen, said that not even the Devil could resist the beauty and wonder and satisfaction of God’s love.

The spiritual giants of our faith encourage us to bring ourselves into the Presence of the Sacred every day. The Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner), or a Centreing Prayer, in which we use a word, such as ‘love’, ‘Jesus’, or ‘compassion’, as a means of being still, slowing our breathing, and letting the *pneuma*, the breath of God, fill us and calm us.

Sustained by this spiritual calm, we can hold within us and before God the pain of the world, the violence and the suffering, the injustice and the mystery. Soaked in the silence of God, refreshed by God’s love, we can experience God in and through all that is hurtful in life. The story of the Ascension tells us that our journey in this life is a journey moving ever deeper into God. Like the Risen Christ, we can take our pain and brokenness with us, and we will be healed.

Amen.