

*St Sepulchre-without-Newgate*

*Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2012*

*BBC Radio 4 Ascension Service*

*Eph. 1.15-25; Luke 24.44-53*

## **A SERMON FOR ASCENSION DAY**

A story is told about Jesus entering heaven after the Ascension to be met by the Archangel Gabriel: ‘Welcome back, boss! It’s good to see you. But who have you left in charge down there?’ Jesus replied, ‘Peter, and the other disciples.’ ‘You what?!’ ‘They’ll do,’ said Jesus.

Leaving a few mostly disunited disciples in charge is hardly a recipe for running the world. Yet within a few centuries, those first few Christians had turned the powerful Roman Empire upside down and Christianity had become the official religion. It is a graphic example of the question: ‘who is in charge round here?’

The question was posed recently just down the road. St Sepulchre’s faces one side of the London Stock Exchange with St Paul’s Cathedral on the other.

When the Occupy protestors couldn’t get into the Stock Exchange in Paternoster Square, they set up camp next to the Cathedral instead. If they had come in from the north, they would have been here at St Sepulchre’s.

When I visited the protestors’ tents, they were asking the same question: ‘Who is in charge round here? The free market? Investment bankers?’ Shortly afterwards, I went on a study tour, teaching about how the Bible is used in ethical debates today – and I found Occupy everywhere. I was in Washington DC when the police cleared out the camp there; in Christchurch, New Zealand, the tents survived the earthquake after-shocks better than buildings! They are still camped on public land at the HSBC HQ in Hong Kong. And always the same question: ‘Who is in charge around here? A question never more pertinent this week as the fate of the Euro and of countries like Greece hangs in the balance. The question is asked in many, different ways: “Can profit be all we care about?”’

The Ascension which we celebrate today provides the answer, even if it seems rather odd, with Jesus leaving this world and ‘being carried up into heaven’ (Luke 24.51): after forty days celebrating Easter, Christians don’t get much chance to reflect on the Ascension. And if Jesus is in heaven ‘up there’ somewhere, does it suggest that God is remote, a long way away from our basic concerns about who is really running the world?

In our epistle, Paul prays that God ‘may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, with the eyes of your heart enlightened,’ (Eph 1.17-18) – in other words, Paul prays that we may see the world as God sees it. This is often the opposite of our ideas. Jesus proclaimed ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’, God’s rule or reign: the Christian tradition makes a radical claim - that God is lovingly and sacrificially in charge of the universe – but that he wants us to co-operate with his rule. When we let God be God, then all sorts of topsy turvy things take place, turning the world upside-down. This is all very uncomfortable for any culture that thinks it can control everything. Jesus’ miracles and parables of the kingdom are all about what happens when we let God be in control: lost sheep and wayward children are found, abundant harvests spring up, prostitutes and social outcasts enter ahead of respectable folk, the lame walk, the blind see, the poor are fed and water gets changed into fine wine.

How did the authorities in Jesus’s day react to this? Just like any civil authority would. The Roman security forces were as prepared as the police in London or Washington – and moved quickly to head off trouble. Jesus was arrested, subjected to a kangaroo court, and executed – and that, was that, or so it seemed to Peter and the first disciples who denied him, forsook him and ran away.

But, says Paul, ‘God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead.’ (Eph. 1.20). The resurrection is the most extraordinary example of letting God be in charge. This church of St Sepulchre is named after the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built where many in the early church believed both the crucifixion and resurrection actually happened. In the middle of that building, there’s an empty tomb.

So, where did Jesus go when God raised him? God ‘seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places’: the crucified proclaimer of God’s reign now shares it in heaven, ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.’ (1.21) The real answer to Occupy’s question is that in the end, no human agency is ultimately in charge of the

universe. They may think – and even act – as though they are. The Romans thought they had got Jesus nailed down, with a large stone rolled over him, yet he rose triumphant – and his followers turned that empire upside down.

This morning, as always on Ascension Day, I was on the pavement outside King's College, robed up, with a crucifer carrying a cross and a thurifer swinging incense as our choir sang Ascension hymns to the somewhat bemused, even amused, passers-by on their way down Fleet Street to work in the Banks and Stock Exchange. Jesus still calls Christians to proclaim this extraordinary message and follow his example of self-sacrifice today, just as he relied on Peter and the first Christians to turn the world upside-down when he returned to heaven. But where does this leave those very same bankers and stock exchange workers passing me this morning in the street, many of whom also want to 'do the right thing'? I am Deputy Chair of the Ethical Investment Advisory Group – which advises on all the church's investments – and we recently coordinated letters in one national broadsheet criticising excessive pay and bonus awards to top executives. Other investors, responsible for a total of £1.5 trillion, joined us in opposing this – and this has now started to bear fruit in several major companies' AGMs where stockholders have turned upside down Boards' proposals for pay and bonuses. And so – in some small way – our actions might begin to open the way for the topsy-turvy world where God's loving rule sets the priorities, not selfish profit for the few.

Jesus' odd reply to Gabriel, in the story I started with – that he had no other plans for running the world – remains true: Jesus did not only preach the ultimate and loving rule of God, but he lived it and died for us and for all the world. Personal profit and selfish gain cannot understand this. Today, of all days, he still calls us to proclaim this same message: we are to care for one another, and for this fragile planet as he cared and died for us, and show that God is the one who is really in charge round here, by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, caring for the hurting, letting the oppressed go free, and bringing good news to the poor – now *that's* what I call a bonus package!

Now to him whom God has raised far above all powers and dominions be all might, majesty and glory, in the church and in the world, now and for ever, Amen.

*The Rev'd Professor Richard A. Burrige, Dean of King's College London*