

Sermon on Ascension Day, 29 May 2025

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Acts 1 v 11: Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?

Have you ever stood on the kerbside and waved, and waved, until a loved one's car finally disappears round a distant bend?

Have you ever chased a railway train along a platform, to snatch one last smile from a loving face?

Have you ever stared at the lights of an aeroplane in the darkening sky and imagined a loved one waving back to you. Those of my generation might remember Elton John's early song, Daniel.

Of course, the Disciples of Jesus did not want to let him go. They had lost him once

already, only to see him return in those confusing, haphazard encounters we call the Resurrection Appearances. Now he is going again, and they don't know when he will return.

Even temporary separation is bereavement. We should not be surprised that they stand and peer at the clouds, until those mysterious men in white rather tactlessly interrupt their moment.

There is a bit more to this, theologically. This is not the first Ascension story in our scriptures, we heard earlier how the prophet Elijah was swept from the Earth in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind, before the eyes of his grieving successor Elisha. Elisha has asked his mentor for that 'double portion of his spirit', formally appointing him as his successor as prophet of Israel. Elijah grants his wish on one condition – that Elisha is there to see him taken away. Elisha cannot

take on Elijah's mantle until he has let him go.

The Disciples will not take up the their role as Apostles to the world, as successors to Jesus in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, until they have let him go, seen the cloud take him from their site. They may not look away. They too will receive a new Spirit, though unlike Elisha, they will have to wait ten days for it to arrive.

But they are not to spend those ten days staring at the sky – there are things to do in Jerusalem.

But if the Disciples can no longer see Jesus through the cloud, does that mean that Jesus can no longer see us? Is he not looking back at the world he loves? I'm going to get a bit fanciful now, and imagine what might be going on in heaven.....

Jesus, fresh from the glory of the Ascension, was back home in heaven and wondering what it would be like moving back to the family home after all those years away. He had so much to tell his Father about all the pains and glories of the past 40 days.

For days dad watched his son, always looking anxiously back down at the world he loved. But after a week or so, Dad asked him, in that annoying way that parents have, about his plans for the future. So Jesus told him of his vision of a worldwide community of disciples, not just Jews, but men and women of all nations, witnessing and worshipping for endless generations. 'I see,' said Father. 'And how are you going to make all this happen, son?'

'Well dad, you know I had a special group of friends, the twelve disciples and a few other men and women - well I asked them to tell other people about me, and those people

will tell more people, and they will tell more people in turn, until everybody has heard the good news.'

Dad looked a bit doubtful, he'd known the human race for a long time and he knew how unreliable people could be. 'Do you mean that man Peter, the one who denied you?', 'Yes' said Jesus, 'I have faith in him'. 'And that man Thomas, who wouldn't believe in you?' 'Yes', replied Jesus, 'I have faith in him too'. 'But what if it all doesn't work Son? What if they let you down? What's your Plan B?'

Jesus replied 'It has to work Dad, there is no plan B!

On the tenth day God put his arm round his son and whispered 'you love them, don't you?' Yes, Jesus answered. 'So do I' said his Dad, and each of them blew a gentle kiss out into the darkness before them.

And by the time that breath of love reached an upstairs room in an old walled city it had become a wind of change and a fire of passion, and a small group friends went out and changed the world.

That breath of love is still making its way through time and space, blowing into everyday lives. Is it blowing on you, or are you still staring at the sky? I cannot tell you what you need to let go before it can reach you, that is between you and God.

There may not be men in white to call you on, but the challenge and the invitation is open. Are you ready to be part of God's Plan A, to be His witnesses to Hertford, to England and to the whole world. The Spirit will soon be here. And remember, there is no Plan B.

Amen