

† ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday after the Ascension
June, 2019

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the reading used for the Epistle:

“They looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel, which also said, ‘ye men of Gallilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven, this same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.’”

Our family had the good fortune to live in the town of Cape Canaveral. From our balcony, we would watch the space shuttles take off. As a rocket would lift into the sky, all eyes would be transfixed. After a few minutes, all that would be left of the sight was a speck and a trail of vapor. Yet, people would stare upwards for an hour until the last vapor would fade away. Then the crowd would disperse, whispering about the awesome spectacle, and return to their everyday lives, tanning, waiting tables or doing whatever job that employed them. As time went by, only tourists and die-hard space junkies even went out to watch the launches.

In my mind, I see the crowd witnessing the Ascension looking very much like the crowd witnessing the first launch. They stand in awe, necks back, eyes up, in contemplation and in wonder, basking in the glory of the Lord as he enters the cloud. I am sure their jaws are dropped in wonder as they say, “Wow, how blessed we are to witness this event!” The difference is, that the Apostle’s are not going to return to their everyday lives. Things are going to change, quickly and irreversibly for them. To drive home the point,

they aren't even going to be allowed to stare up until the vapor trail disperses.

As they stand there gaping, two angels appear at their sides and say, “Ahem!” What are you doing guys? This Jesus that you watched being taken up, He told you he would return, and He told you His return would be for Judgement. Looking pious, staring at the sky, contemplating His glory is not going to cut it. You have your orders, praise God, witness to Jesus Christ, be charitable to your brethren. Get to work.”

It is to the credit of the Apostles that they didn't need to be told twice. They got the message. They went back home, they prayed in the Temple, praised God and witnessed to Jesus Christ for the world. They ate the Supper they were commanded to eat in remembrance of Jesus and they loved one another, because Jesus told them that the world would know Him by the love they showed to each other. St Peter confirms this mandate for action when he writes “As every man has received the gift, even so, minister to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

This business of Christianity, following the advice of the angels at the Ascension, acting on the exhortation of St. Peter, is **real** work. Real work is tiring. It wears on these mortal bodies, and The Good Lord knows, we are already tired. How tired we are is the constant source of our conversation, and maybe it is because I feel it so much myself, but our weariness seems to be such a great preoccupation for us today, that we just can't seem to escape.

Forget descriptions like Baby boomers, Gen Xers, Millenials or any such label. This generation is the tired generation. It is little wonder that the thought of pure religious

contemplation, meditation, solitude, isolation with God and his marvelous works of Nature seem so attractive to us. We want to escape the world, and get some rest in joyful bliss with God. All those contemplative pursuits are wonderful tools, but they are not our end, our purpose, our gift or our ministry. What is our end, our purpose, and our gift is to do good works, praising the Lord our God and loving our brethren as we have been loved.

And we don't have that long to do the work. The Epistle starts with the warning, "the end of all things is at hand." (1st Peter 4:7). I won't be presumptuous enough to join in the chorus of people claiming the world is going to end tomorrow, but in the scheme of things, we have to understand that it will end soon. The exact time is hidden with the Father, but we do know that our end is not indefinite. In the next few days or years or decades, the end of all things for each of us will be realized in our deaths. That end of all things for us will mean the beginning of new things, but I hate to leave a job undone, and if there is a time limit imposed, especially one I can't pinpoint, I want to get to the work immediately.

The work to do is the work of the great commandment. To love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and to love out neighbors as ourselves. We show our love for God by obedience to his Commandments. We show our love for each other by charity, appreciation and by giving each other time. Time to listen, time to talk, time to share. In parable after parable, our Lord warns us that time will run out, that we will be called to pay our debts, to account for our talents, to be found with our lamps full, and our houses in order.

We hear regularly that we want and need the Church to grow. Where will that growth derive. We aren't getting any more disgruntled Episcopalians or Roman Catholics. What attracts people to the Evangelical mega-churches is not compatible with our sacramental foundation. The people we should be evangelizing are the people who go on long walks, or horseback rides or just sit in their homes with their music and their games rather than come to church. It will come from the people who would rather talk to God on their own than worship with us.

The reason they don't come to Church is because they are tired of the world. They are tired of backbiting, cliques, unkindness and gossip. They are tired of being judged. What they aren't tired of is being loved, being nurtured, being made welcome. What they aren't tired of is a place that is vacant of gossip, elitism and division. The music and the sermons won't bring people here, only kindness will. If you want a church to grow like the one started by the Apostles, then you need to make a church that excels in Christian charity. Otherwise, our church just makes the people we want to come even more tired and dispirited, and they would rather be alone.

"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen Him go." Let's be ready when he comes. Let's be accountable for using the time he has given us for the purpose He has given us. Let's be busy obeying Him and caring for each other.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.