

THE PARISH OF CHIRK
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PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 81 (May 2010)

Ascension Day always falls forty days after Easter Sunday, and so is always on a Thursday. Forty days was an old term for “a few weeks” – for a few weeks after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples...but then he finally left them. The event (if there was one) is recounted by Matthew and Luke at the end of their gospels, and also again by Luke at the beginning of his second volume – The Acts of the Apostles. Details differ, but some interesting and important implications may be inferred.

Matthew's account is sometimes called “the great commission”. Jesus, having declared his authority, instructs his disciples to make disciples and baptise them (“in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”). From this order, Christians historically have engaged in mission and evangelism, and administered the sacrament of baptism. Luke's account overall contains the same material but reworked, emphasising the worship given to Jesus, and the belief that he was carried up into heaven (though some manuscripts lack that phrase). In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke repeats the same ideas, but adds the early Christian belief that Jesus will return in the same way as he departed.

I doubt if we are to take the Ascension story literally. Rather, we are to see it as a way of accounting for the absence of the risen living Jesus from earth, and also to declare that he is the Son of God with God in heaven, sharing the divinity and authority and glory of God. In that position, Jesus is worthy of worship, and also he hears our prayers and responds to them. His place in heaven may be regarded as evidence of our hope of reaching heaven through faith in him. The ascension of Jesus marks his final vindication by God.

The Ascension of Jesus, however, left the disciples alone to get on with life without the physical presence and reassurance of Jesus. That is why he sent the promised Holy Spirit to help us. Now we too must live by faith, not by sight, guided by God's Holy Spirit.