

Acts 1:1-11: Ascension Day 2014

Think about great comebacks:

- Sporting – Botham Ashes 1981, Liverpool 3-0 2005 Champions League final; Leyton Orient wrong end on Sunday
- Or career – Winston Churchill – rising star, failure of Gallipoli, 1930s washed up – then war...
- Passage today from Acts between 2 greatest comebacks of all time:

First we celebrated a few weeks ago – Easter – Jesus rose from dead, just like he said he would. Mark 3 times ch8,9,10.

LUKE refers to it explicitly READ 24:46-47. Fulfilment of prophets. But one more part not fulfilled yet – message to all nations (for which need power of Spirit)

And so fast-forward to Acts 1, where now meets disciples for last time on earth. Wonder how disciples would have felt. Sadness (leaving) and excitement (new challenge, new power). Jesus says final words and then ascends into heaven...

At this point we get promise of greatest comeback of all. If you thought resurrection was impressive, you ain't seen nothin' yet: **READ v11b. This same Jesus... will come back.**

I wonder what you think of the return of Jesus? Do you think of it at all? After all, it's been 2,000 years... Or does the idea make you shudder? Are you worried for yourself or people you know? Are you intrigued? Will there be trumpets and flashing lights? Will his appearance be so astonishing that the wicked will be asking rocks to fall on them in their terror? Or will it be more like the thief in the night, as if by stealth?

There are lots of things you can preach on at the Ascension. We could focus on what it means for Jesus to have completed his earthly work. Or for the necessity of his ascension so the Spirit could be poured out. We could think about what it means for the kingdom to be restored to Israel, or what it means to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. But tonight I want us to focus on this phrase: This same Jesus... will come back.

Second Coming relegated in importance in recent times – much like Ascension, in fact. We think about *now* a lot, and heaven a bit – but bit in between hardly at all. Simple plea tonight to recover the importance of this doctrine: **JESUS WILL COME BACK. HE IS COMING BACK.**

One of truths about doing job I do is that Britain is now a very hard nation, spiritually speaking. It is stony, thorny ground. It takes an immense amount of effort to see even a few people come to anything like vibrant, committed, enthusiastic faith. In Africa, I sat in a village one evening in rural Tanzania where they showed the Jesus Film, and then a speaker preached afterwards. People cheered whenever Jesus did a miracle and tutted when he was falsely accused and condemned. 100 people came forward to commit their lives to Christ that evening, the equivalent of a medium-sized church in this country. A lot may not survive, but even so...

Here we don't bother doing big evangelistic events anymore, because the fruit is so minimal: Clapham Common 2004 – 200 churches, 5,000 seater x 10 nights – 1,000 came forward – half commitments, only 10% stick it – all that for 50 people.

Lots of reasons why: self-obsessed, wealthy, Enlightenment, consumerism, form of economic liberalism which has left us working excessively long hours. Point to things in church too. But here's central theological reason: people don't think Jesus coming back. No return, no judgement.

If people really believed that one day they would have to give an account to God for everything they've done, do you think they would be as casual about faith and commitment as they are?

Would they be happy just pitching up to a Crib service or midnight communion, getting their kids baptised, putting Christian on the census form, coming to the odd thing, praying in a crisis, but living essentially as atheists the rest of the time?

Just back from a couple of days with my dad. When arrived, noticed he'd made some obvious preparations: big box of cocoa pops (despite diabetic), cars parked strategically, spare bed in his room – *he knew we were coming*. And he prepared.

Challenge for us too – not just 'them' – message for us. Sobering thing is that those tough parables of Jesus were spoken to people who thought they were insiders. Only half had oil in their lamps, some buried their talent in the ground, a few were goats. This same Jesus is coming back – are we ready?

How live in light of this? Back to v11 – READ 11a. **Way to be ready is to press on in faith.** Not to stand looking into sky trying to work out when. Lot of people waste a lot of time on that – e.g. of chap in 2012 predicting end of world; OR reading Revelation like a code. No, ironically the solution is not to sit around pondering, but to get on with following.

You're here – preaching to converted. But let's see Ascension as a challenge and encouragement to remind ourselves that Jesus is coming back, and to re-commit to a real, living faith as a result. Not to scare you, this is a hopeful passage: he will come back, every wrong will be put right. Ultimately, he wins! And because he wins, we win! And so we resolve to keep close to Jesus, to keep growing and moving on in faith because we know he is returning and it will all be worth it. That's a message the world needs to hear. Maybe a message for us too tonight. Amen.