

## Sunday After Ascension 2021 – ‘who wants to turn turtle’? from Fr. Mike



- Acts 1.15-17, 21-26
- Psalm 1
- 1 John 5.9-13
- John 17.6-9

Half-way between Brazil and Africa there is a tiny dot of green in the tropical mid-Atlantic Ocean. It is an odd scrap of volcanic rock, risen out of a vast sea, still British territory (roughly the size of Guernsey) and known as Ascension Island. This outpost of Empire is curiously hot and cold at the same time. The terrain of the island is wild, barren and rugged. The lower coastal areas are hot and dry, but the island is dominated by the 859m Green Mountain, the summit of which is lush, green and offers a slightly cooler climate.

There are stunning white sandy beaches and impressive volcanic rock formations including lava flows, fumaroles, and caves. The sea is crystal clear, tropically warm and abundant with marine life. As well as its natural heritage, being an important strategic military outpost, there is a rich historical heritage on the island of abandoned forts, installations and dwellings dating back to the 18th century.

There are a number of reasons why Ascension Island is an odd place. Officially, nobody is from there. The UK government denies the right of abode – consequently

the 800- ish 'British Citizens' are technically only temporary visitors, despite living there for decades. To enter, you need the written permission of the Queen's representative, known rather chillingly as the Administrator. The airport is operated by the US Air Force and despite our apparently 'special relationship' grants limited access to Britain. It was designed to accommodate the American space shuttle, so at one point had the longest runway in the world. NASA tracked the Apollo Moon landings from Ascension and the European Space Agency also monitors rocket launches from this location. The RAF use it as refuelling facility as it is conveniently half-way from the UK en route to the Falkland Islands. There are myriads of ariels, satellite dishes and other listening devises on the hilltops, although nobody really knows who is listening to what, or why! Obviously all top-secret stuff.

For most of the 500 years that people have been visiting the Ascension Island, turtles have been dinner. Sailors would haul these beautiful and majestic creatures (which can weigh as much as 250kg) away from their volcanic paradise in their ships and "turn" them onto their backs to keep them alive, sometimes for weeks, before boiling them up for soup. This 'harvesting' ended in the 1930's. Nevertheless, Ascension's turtle numbers only began to recover in the 1970's because hatchlings take decades to reach maturity before they return to lay eggs on the beach of their birth. It is only recently that we are seeing the positive effects of stopping this 'harvesting' as there are now around 3-5,000 turtles nesting each year.

At one point, Charles Darwin experimented here by introducing plant species and observing their development as he attempted to import an eco-system where none had previously existed. However altruistic this might have been in the short-term,

there were a number of unintended consequences to this behaviour, as unfortunately it became an example of human meddling rather than efficient stewardship of Creation.

What we collectively do with the beautiful world entrusted to us by God does not always make sense. Equally, what we understand about the ascension of our Lord can be both hot and cold at the same time and produce much confusion as a result.

**'And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them'** (v.10)

We see countless glimpses of heaven in the ordinary. Aspects of the risen Lord briefly punctuate our lives, but seldom make sense. Thankfully, some of the symbolism we regularly employ can assist to anchor certain elusive, yet fundamentally important, truths. Look to our altars in church for instance. There are usually **two** candles. They remind us that Jesus (God the Son) took on human nature yet remained fully God at the same time. Can this make sense? The addition of this human nature to the divine nature is Jesus, the God-man. Theologians call this the Hyperstatic union - Jesus Christ, one person, fully God and fully man. These two natures of Jesus are inseparable, not mixed. United, without losing the separate identities. This is a doctrine we are incapable of understanding, due to the limits of our human (finite) minds, as we cannot ever fully comprehend how our (infinite) God works. We are occasionally granted some insights, and the ascension of our Lord is one of those occasions where we are treated to a recap and preview (a kind of 'the story so far' and 'so what' moment). In this particular episode, the ascension triggers previous key revelations and emphasises once again that Jesus is both God *and* man. He has always been God, although did not become a human being until he was

conceived by the Holy Spirit. You can indeed be cold and hot at the same time. When Jesus became a human being he had two natures, but only one personality. This humanity allowed him to communicate and identify with our struggles. Crucially, he was able to die on the Cross to pay the penalty (be the 'propitiation' as the BCP puts it) for our sins (Philippians 2. 5-11). He has always existed. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, there is no mixture or dilution of either his human or divine nature, and He is one united Person forever.

The feast of the Ascension should not therefore be reduced to a matter of 'bye folks, see you in heaven' otherwise we remain spiritually remote and under-developed, just like the island of the same name, remaining at least 700 miles from anywhere!

Although we are only temporary visitors on earth, it would be an irresponsible travesty for us to persist in our attempt to control things; collectively turning our spiritual lives onto their back to use for our own convenience (like sailors with their ascension turtles) or at some point of our future choosing. Our Lord has clearly done his bit, so we now need to do ours by living a righteous (sometimes sacrificial) life to promote His earthly kingdom in all respects until we see Him again face-to-face! The psalmist reminds us why; **'...for the Lord watches over the righteous.'** The ascension of our Lord reveals that the events of Christ's Cross and passion, his resurrection on Easter Day, together with his return to His eternal home forty days later, all confirm his promise of an everlasting place that awaits with an omnipotent God who still clearly loves us. Meanwhile, we are charged to 'up' our game; to ascend **'in heart and mind'** and indeed in all respects while we remain on earth.

Fr. Mike (Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021)