

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Footprints in the Dust

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

Acts 1:1-11

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

I may have told you before about the ascension window in the church I was a member of in Chicago - Morgan Park Presbyterian church. There the small windows down one side of the sanctuary depicted Old Testament stories, and the windows coming up the other side depicted stories from the life of Jesus. The ascension window was the one which was right in my line of vision as I sat opposite the pulpit in the chancel. The picture was of clouds, and, seeming to dangle from the clouds, a pair of bare feet. The weathering of the glass had led to the feet being more than a little green in colour! Two green feet disappearing into a cloud. Is that how we are to think of the ascension of our Lord?

A couple of weeks ago the Scripture Union group at Newtonmore school read this story and drew pictures. One of them has the words Ka-Boom! scrawled across the top - which perhaps isn't a bad way of depicting the power of the event. That same picture has a disciple asking, "Where are you going?" and the Jesus figure saying "Heaven" which is nice and clear. Another picture has one of the disciples saying "Don't go", which is very likely what they were at least thinking if not saying aloud.

Ka-Boom, and Jesus goes to heaven. Is that how we are to think of it? If it is, then surely this is the end of the story of Jesus. "Don't go", is that what we feel we too would like to cry out?

Perhaps we too should pay more attention to what the two men in white said to the disciples. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" There is more to the ascension than feet in a cloud. There is more than the ka-boom of power (though that is a good insight) and there should be more than a feeling of "Don't go", because in ascending, Jesus did more than go to a physical existence in a place called heaven. And it is not the end of the Jesus story at all.

Turning our faces upwards is not what Jesus wanted of his followers. He had told them that they would be his witness in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Standing looking upwards was not going to accomplish that. They should not have gazed sadly upwards at the disappearing feet (if that is what they did see): they should have looked downwards, at the footprints left in the dust. Their calling, which is our calling, was to follow where these footprints led. To go where Jesus had gone and where Jesus was still to go. They should have been looking at the footprints that were to lead them down from the hill-top and out into the world. They should have been rejoicing that Jesus in his ascension was freed from his human body, the limitations which he had known in his life among us, free from being in only one place and time, free to go into all the world.

Ka-boom! God's power is unleashed in the world in the ascension, just as it will also be unleashed at Pentecost. In fact the two events are parts of the same whole. In the ascension Jesus departs his human, limited existence, and at Pentecost, which we mark next week, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, gives power to his followers to be the agents to take his message, his love, his revolution, out into the world.

When I was at the General Assembly last week, it was a fairly strenuous, not to say tiring time of intense thought and debate, of listening and decision-making. As the week wore on, I began to reflect that having half-made one fairly controversial decision on the Monday, the Assembly seemed loath to make any other visionary or far-reaching changes. Proposals which might have led to churches getting a wider vision than just that of their own patch or parish were rejected; proposals which were designed to free more time for outreach and mission were let go. In the debates there seemed to be a lot of territorial points being made - either about one part of the country and its needs set against perceived favouritism of other parts, or about one theological outlook pitching against another. It seemed that there was a lot of fearful inward-looking, and not enough big-picture thinking, not enough looking outward to the needs of our nation and beyond - at least in the decisions made.

And I thought about that when I read this passage from Acts . I wondered if too often the church - the people of the church - spend too long gazing towards the heavens - looking inwards at ourselves and wondering how we will manage with Jesus gone; and do not spend enough time looking down at his footprints in the dust and following where Jesus has gone before us.

Maybe we are afraid. Maybe we are afraid of the effort it will cost us, of the changes which it will bring into our lives, of the fact that we will be different from how we have been, different from our neighbours around us. If we are really serious about following Jesus' footprints in the dust, then it will not be possible that our direction of travel could be secret, that those around us will not know. It will be obvious.

It was obvious in the lives of the first century Christians to whom Peter wrote. And over and over again as we have dipped into his first letter, we have seen that these Christians were becoming the butt of society. They were being accused of all sorts of things which they did not do, and for which they did not stand, and it was painful for them. Maybe we are afraid of something of the sort happening to us. Certainly we live in a time when to be known as a Christian is not to automatically be given respect. (Although still, those whose Christianity shines through their lives making them models of openness, honesty and compassion do gain the respect of those who know them.)

Peter brings us back again and again to the Christ whom we say we worship, follow and serve. Again and again he reminds us that being misunderstood, reviled, opposed should not surprise us, because it is what happened to Jesus. If we follow his footsteps into the world, then that may well be, not the effect, but a side effect. A side effect is something that you put up with when you are taking a medicine, because it is worth having a little inconvenience to have the greater good of being cured, made well. The side effect of following Jesus' footsteps may be that we are misunderstood, but the effect, the great good is that the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on us (1 Pet 4:14).

The Spirit of glory, the same glory and power which raised Jesus from death: the Spirit of glory, the same glory which received Jesus from the earth, the Ka-boom of God is resting on us. And it is resting on us so that we too can go forth into the world and follow in Jesus' footsteps, doing good and speaking truth.

Peter also encourages us to cast our anxieties on God. How often we think of that as being our personal worries: about the children, the grandchildren, our income, our health, our government. And we can and should give these worries to God. But in the context of Peter's letter, I am sure that primarily Peter would want us to cast our worries about what the world

may think of us, what people might say about us onto God's broad shoulders. He cares for you. He won't let it get unbearable. And once we have given him our concerns, they are gone. God takes them from us, so that we can look down at the footprints and out at the world.

Today we meet around the Lord's table, where we are privileged to know our unity with Christ, and his with us as we take the elements of bread and wine. Many of us think of that as an intensely private matter, and so it is. Your unity with God in Christ is the most personal thing about you. But as the most personal thing, it is also what most deeply defines you - more than your age, your wealth, your gender, your marital status - all the things that the world looks on. And as the thing which most deeply defines you, your unity with God, his identification of you as one of his children, cannot be hidden, any more than I can hide the fact that I am a married woman with children to bring up. At the table we remember that we are forgiven and healed and made whole. But we only partially understand what this means if we forget that God does this because he delights in us, and because he wants us to be useful to him in spreading his love to others, whom he also loves and longs for.

So as we gather round the table, as we sit in silence, let us not look too much into the heavens, for Christ is freed from the body and at work in the world. Let us instead ask God to help us see where his footprints lead us and follow them.

Follow them to the side of the sick.

Follow them to the playgrounds of the young.

Follow them to the aid of the oppressed, the hungry, the victims of society - the larger society of the world, and the smaller society of our own community.

Let us seek to follow the footprints, remembering that we are not alone. God has brought us together to work together, to witness together, to support and help each other. Around the table we remember our unity with Christ, but also we rejoice that he has united us with one another.

So today we rejoice, for Jesus is ascended and so he is not gone. He is ascended and so he is with us as we follow him into the world. Look down at the footprints in the dust and dare to follow where they lead.

Amen.