

Hymn: Psalm 43 (CH4 35) O send Thy light forth

Invocation

Prayer

Refrain: **CH4 782**

Eriskay Love Lilt

**Lord of life, we come to You.
Lord of all, our Saviour be,
Come to bless and to heal
With the light of Your love**

Let us pray,
Lord of life, we come to You.

Refrain

Risen Christ, glorious You now ascend into heaven,
There to take Your seat
And be acclaimed by angels.
In vain we seek to imagine
The heights to which You aspire.
Higher than high,
Further than our most perceptive
Thoughts,
Closer to God than our best imagine,
You reign, celestial, and supreme.
Lord of life, we come to You.

Refrain

Yet here on earth,
Your footprints are still seen
And Your words are still warm.
Let us follow in Your footsteps,
And let Your words shape all that we are and do.
Lord of life, we come to You.

Refrain

Forgive us for those times when
Our eyes are fixed on the ground,

Too intent on the minutiae to see Your bigger picture.
Forgive us for those times when
Our eyes gaze vacantly into the heavens,
Too unfocussed to notice the connections
Made by Your careful hands.
Forgive us for those times when we have chosen
Darkness over light;
Fear over reassurance;
Conflict over peace,
Selfishness over generosity.
Forgive us for those times when,
Far from heaven as we often are,
Earth itself seems reluctant to own us too
And we live our lives in shadow.

Refrain

Hear all our prayers in the Name of Christ our Lord,
Who taught us when we pray together to say:
Our Father
Which art in Heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth
As it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory.
Forever.
Amen

Reading: **Acts 1:1-11**

NYA?

Reflection: Word of Life – Light

There is a glorious window depicting the Ascension in Morningside Parish Church. There are angels and choirs and music and light. At the centre is the ascending figure of Christ in Majesty; at the bottom the disciples. Praising, weeping, wondering, doubting, believing. It is suffused with light.

It is an image of that part of the Apostles' Creed that says, "He ascended in to heaven." The real drama of the Ascension is not the presenting problem about what happened to the body of Jesus after Easter. The acute issue is how will the Early Church continue after Jesus is no longer present? The focus of the Ascension is not Jesus miraculously disappearing, it is of the Church continuing. It is a Church question, not a Jesus question. "Ascension Day is not so much about the physical act of ascension... Rather, it is concerned with the divine act of *making space* so that the mission of the church can begin."ⁱ It is about making space so that light can come in to our work.

The Early Church was a fearful, anxious, bewildered, waiting community. It had no power of its own. Yet within weeks this fragile community of disparate people found the power and energy and the imagination and the resource, completely disproportionate to its size, to begin to spread the good news. It was given light. It found light. In this waiting time between Easter and Pentecost, mysterious Ascension comes, and the membrane between heaven and earth is altered eternally. There is now the promise of coming and going. Most of you will have seen paintings or stained glass windows of the Ascension. The earthbound disciples looking plaintively upward, and usually from the very top of the painting or picture there are two little feet, Jesus' feet, dangling tantalisingly in view, before the Saviour rockets into eternity.

We are not left swathed in cloud looking up into heaven waiting for Jesus or someone else to do it for us; we are left not in darkness but in light – to get on with it.

In recent months our lives appear to have been lived in heavy cloud, like an Edinburgh haar. Even with faith the darkness never seems far away. We talk about living under the shadow of the cross; some lurk around the darkness of the tomb. Even the garden of the resurrection is in the ambivalent grey light of dawn. In the Ascension story there is more cloud. But this I believe to be true – we are meant to look beyond the cloud and anticipate the light that burns behind it. Light, not darkness, lies behind everything.

Is our nation and our world shrouded by cloud at this time? Does darkness mantle the earth? Are we gloomed-over with the 'Rough Wooing' in the low foothills of the increasingly fractious and ill-spirited General Election campaign, polarised by claim and counter claim? Are the lights going out all over Europe as what many fear will be a bitter divorce between our country and Europe, fuelled on every side by politicians and pundits pedalling fear. Are we entering a new Dark Age of misinformation, alternative fact and fake news, finding our

world divided by walls and threat of walls and not connected by bridges? In the Church, our own denomination and virtually every other, ongoing debates about same-sex relationships, the role of women, and some resolute navel-gazing about too many buildings filled with too few people.

The clouds seem heavy and impenetrable. The blight of racially motivated violence and homophobia. Gender inequality and violence against women continues to brutalise. The cruelty of poverty and scandal of homelessness. Human trafficking leaves a dark scar on the nations of the world. The isolation of our older people and the marginalising of the young. The ignoring of those with poor mental health. The fracturing of our communities by incessant individualism and endless working hours. The clouds are gathering and lowering and apparently magnified by the sing-song voices of despair from some quarters of the media and social media.

Where is the light? Where is the word of life that says “light” to the darkened hearts and minds and bodies and souls? Where

is the light that scatters the pain and hurt and fear? Where is the light that Jesus promised? The prose-poem of the Ascension seems to take Jesus away from the world at the very moment when His presence would be most beneficial. We are found looking hopefully, sceptically, longingly, despairingly into the darksome clouds. Where is this God Who is supposed to be with us? Is it the case that, “God goes missing so that we look for Him.”ⁱⁱ

God's messengers challenge the disciples, and us, not to look helplessly into heaven, but to look around us on earth at the work that Jesus has left us to do. The American writer Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.” Might it be that light is going to be found not only above our heads but also around us in the actions and needs of those around us, and the people we help and the people who help us?

Do we really believe that Jesus will come back is an important question? Rather than crossing our legs and holding on until

then in hope, might we be better employed getting on with the things we know He wants us to do and be. The French novelist Emile Zola once said of his life: “If you ask me what I came to do in this world...I will answer you: I came to live out loud.”

The message of Ascension remains true: be patient, work steadily, strength will come. God is still with you. The imagery and word-pictures used around the story of Ascension are of God going up, of departure. But beyond this lies the reality that this passage marks a time of transition. Where once the followers of Jesus could depend on Jesus being around, physically, to deal with things for them; now they are being challenged to deal with things for themselves, inspired by Him, His teaching, His example, His love. The Church is not a memorial society for a dead Jesus. Rather, if our faith means anything to us, we take it and the tools of love and grace and mercy and joy that have been given to us; and we use them; we work with them; we apply them, and so we make a difference for good, and light will come.

Desmond Tutu tells about a church in Rome that has a statue of Christ without arms. When you ask why, you are told that is shows how God relies on us, God's human partners, to get up and do God's work for God. Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms; without us, God has no feet.

Then, as we are working and thinking and believing and doing, and maybe even doubting and wondering and struggling, the light will come. After the brilliance of the images of Easter, and the marvel of Ascension, the Spirit of God will blow through the Church to strengthen us for the work we have still to do in Christ's Name. The Word of Life that is light will pierce every cloud, and we glimpse again the possibilities of faith lived out loud in a world needing to hear challenging news of grace, mercy, hope and love.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Prayer (including Prayer of Constitution)

Let us pray:

God un-held by word or wall;

Power of love beyond all lords of war:

Lift us from dullness and cynical contempt;

Make us ready for Your Spirit

Of transforming fire:

And turn our hearts

To the mending of the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lord Jesus Christ,

You rise above the limitations of Creation,

You rise above the limitations of Your people.

Help us, this day to lift up heart and mind

And body and soul

To be open to Your renewing Word of light,

That will chase away the darkness,

And guide us to enable a hopeful and more hospitable world.

God save our Queen,

God bless Her Grace, the High Commissioner, and all her suite.

God be close to the Forces of the Crown,

And especially those who provide for their spiritual care.

God enable the mission and education of all Your people,

That we might learn what faith can be and do.

And for this General Assembly, which now we constitute

In the Name of Christ our Saviour,

Let our decisions this day be signs and promises

Of the brighter life to come,

In Jesus' Name we pray.

Amen.

Hymn: 543 Longing for light

Christ Be Our Light

ⁱⁱ David S Cunningham, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, p522

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words*, p118

iii Steven Shakespeare, Prayers For An Inclusive Church