

Ascension: The Going Away of Jesus

Redeemer, June 2, 2019

Go Raptors!

And apologies for any Golden State Warriors fans who happen to be here today.

Last week Ann Jarvis spoke about vision, and today, I'm going to speak about strategy. We need to know where we're going and we need to know how to get there.

If I had another life I'd like to be a backroom political operative, sometimes called consultant, or strategist, or back room "boy", one of those who helps get candidates elected, and then manages their office in order to get their platform accomplished. I'd like to be the Gerry Butts of recent fame, in the Prime Minister's office. Well, I'd do a better job than he did. In fact in the early stages of the Wilson-Raybould story, I actually emailed my MP, a backbench Liberal, suggesting that they find a competent mediator, to meet with Wilson-Raybould and the PM together and work at reconciliation. Reconciliation: a term that has come to life during this government's mandate, as it relates to indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, but which is so relevant and important in many aspects of our lives. Alas, no one heeded my advice.

- while at seminary - course on Politics and Personality

Jumping ahead 8 years - Regina General Synod Nominating Committee - smoke filled room

I guess I've already been a backroom political operative!

But this is Ascension, so let's get on to it.

We're often urged, when considering scripture, to pay close attention to the context, to immerse ourselves in the culture, get to know the situation Jesus was facing in his time and in his society - the religious factors, the political factors, the human factors.

In trying to understand the Ascension, I'd like to try the reverse. Using what we know about our time and culture, how would we understand what was going on long ago in Jesus' time?

First, I'd like to rename today's celebration. 'Not Ascension', I'd call it, "*The Going Away of Jesus*" (that has a nice ring to it).

Usually the emphasis of this day is on where Jesus is going (heaven), and what direction he's going in (up). Rather than the 'where' question, I'd focus on the 'why' question.

What was the strategy here? It's one thing to have a vision, it's another thing to move toward it, move into it, make plans for action and accomplishment.

For the Raptors, the goal, the vision is, simply, winning. For the political parties facing our October election, the goal, the vision, is, simply, winning.

Jesus was one who didn't speak in terms of winning or losing, in fact he said the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Jesus was much more into language of cooperation rather than competition.

And yet, God's whole enterprise had a goal in mind, we might say the reconciliation of all humanity. So how to accomplish this goal?

What were God's backroom political operatives thinking? God's advisors in heaven, maybe some of the nameless angels. Jesus' advisors during his ministry, perhaps one or more of the nameless disciples. Backroom political operatives always cling to the shadows, revel in anonymity.

There was the grand vision: saving the world, saving humanity, reestablishing a spiritual connection in the hearts of each individual, giving hope, not despair, peace, not war, justice not prejudice and unfairness.

So how to set out the mission. Send Jesus; give him 3 years to gather a team; teach them by word and example how to function; send them out on a trial run; help them to buy into the mission, the vision. Throw in some exposure to the wider community, a few big crowd occasions. Gathering steam, set up the confrontation in Jerusalem, be sure to have elements of drama - the royal entry, the cleansing of the temple, the arrest, the trial, then the crucifixion. All setting the stage for the grand event - the resurrection. Pay attention to the details, the stories that would emerge along the way. Build in a few setbacks, you don't want it all to be too perfect, too unreal.

It all goes as planned, but then the empty tomb somehow doesn't have the dramatic effect it was supposed to have. Jesus had told the disciples about his death, and also about his resurrection after 3 days. That teaching didn't take hold, I guess. The disciples cowered in a locked room, afraid to venture out, losing their hope and their faith and their focus. So, emergency steps were needed. Bring Jesus back for a few appearances. Prop up the team, re-inspire them, remind them of the vision. Get them on board again. He appeared in the locked room, He appeared to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. He appeared by the seaside as the disciples fished. How carefully the back room operatives would plan this out. How many appearances would it take? Should there be just 3, or perhaps 10, or should Jesus hang around for a hundred years just to be sure that the plan was going to work, that the team would catch on and be motivated for action? They looked back at scripture. Aha, 40 days would be the target. A do or die moment. Either the disciples would be motivated by then, or back to the drawing board for a completely new intervention.

The point is, Jesus had to go away. Even after the appearances, the disciples were asking when he was going to overthrow the Romans and restore the Kingdom of Israel. If Jesus had remained, there's a good possibility that the team he had formed would remain passive, dependent, followers rather than leaders. Mere disciples rather than becoming apostles.

The going away of Jesus was key to the emergence of the church. There's the 10-day interlude until the coming of the powerful Spirit, and then humanity is set on a course to reconciliation. Much like the Raptors and their backroom coaches, putting in place a winning strategy to accomplish their goals.

Note too, that there was much instruction in this strategy for *waiting*. The disciples waited in Jerusalem after the resurrection. At the ascension, the going away ceremony, Jesus tells the disciples to wait, Wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit is given. Timing is important. So is place. In Luke the going away of Jesus takes place in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, the home of Martha and Mary and Lazarus. Just like all the American presidential candidates go to Iowa for campaign appearances, a small village takes precedence over mighty Jerusalem.

What about our strategy today? What can we take from this ascension day story that touches our lives and our church?

I'll just point to two.

One is trust. Jesus in the end trusts the disciples and his going away frees them to take on the mission, and display their trust. We learn day by day to trust. Our Incumbent goes away, we find our confidence to carry on. Our church in the western world seems to be in decline. We trust in the Spirit that revival will come.

The second point is patience. I think today the church is in a waiting mode. We're between Ascension and Pentecost. Part of it is the result of our heritage of colonialism, and in the Anglican case, our heritage of being the established church. Note that the disciples left

Bethany and returned to Jerusalem *with great joy*. We are called to wait, with patience, and with joy, and while we wait we continue to honour God, and we continue to use our best strategic minds to move towards God's kingdom, God's vision for us. We can relax, confident that the Spirit that is with us always, will come in greater power in the days to come, to enliven once again the church, to move us even more forcefully towards God's winning goal of reconciliation.

Meanwhile, We can all be strategists for the Lord. We can use our talents, our skills, our faith to work in small ways, and sometimes in large ways, to work towards the Kingdom. And like the disciples on Ascension day, the day marking the Going Away of the Lord, we can go about our strategizing in joy - knowing in our hearts, the joy of the Lord.