This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use at home. If you are well enough, why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

**Let’s begin by singing our faith as we raise our voice to declare…**

**STF 95 ‘To God be the glory’**

To God be the glory, great things He hath done,
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life gate that all may go in.

**Refrain:**
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
let the people rejoice!

Opening prayers

Almighty God, creator of all, sustained of all
We gather here in our separate locations
To worship you, to adore you and to praise you
We bring all of these in the name of Jesus Christ
Your son, our risen Lord
We offer them to you in the power of your Holy Spirit
And yet despite our failings
You address each one of us as your son or
daughter
Offering us your gift of grace as you say
‘Our sins are forgiven’

(pause in silence)

Lord be with us, wherever we have gathered
Wash over us with your holy spirit
Allow us to die to sin
And to be born again
As people worthy of you and the faith we confess
As we say together the prayer Jesus taught his
disciples to pray...

Our Father...Amen

Today’s bible reading Acts:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all
that Jesus did and taught from the beginning
2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven,
after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to
the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his
suffering he presented himself alive to them by
many convincing proofs, appearing to them
during forty days and speaking about the
kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he
ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait
there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he
said, “is what you have heard from me; 5 for John
baptized with water, but you will be baptized with
[6] the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

6 So when they had come together, they asked
him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore
the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He replied, “It is not for
you to know the times or periods that the Father
has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive
power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all
Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

9 When he had said this, as they were watching,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of
their sight. 10 While he was going and they were
gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in
white robes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of
Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward
heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from
you into heaven, will come in the same way as
you saw him go into heaven.”

Let’s sing a new hymn to a familiar tune.
‘O Christ, when you ascended, you took your
rightful throne’ sung to the tune STF 690 The
church’s one foundation

O Christ, when you ascended,
you took your rightful throne;
Your time on earth had ended
yet we weren’t left alone.
You reign o’er earth and heaven;
your Spirit guides our way.
Your prayers uphold your people;
you lead your church each day.
We look at earthly rulers
and see what they command:
We note their years of power,
the borders of their land.
Yet, Lord, you are not bounded
by things like time and space;
Your reign is never-ending,
you rule in every place.

We’re tempted. Lord, to leave you
in stories nicely told;
Sometimes we don’t believe you
and say your ways are old.
Sometimes we feel so lonely
and live in doubt and fear —
But your ascension means,
Lord, you’re present with us here.

It’s often quite a challenge
to follow in your Way;
We’re easily distracted!
It’s hard, Lord, to obey.
Sometimes we give you Sundays
an hour, maybe two
But your ascension means, Lord,
all life belongs to you.

One day, O Lord, we’ll know you,
as we are fully known;
One day this world of sinners
will bow before your throne.
One day, God’s whole creation
will sing and praise your name;
On earth as now in heaven,
we’ll celebrate your reign.

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Today's message

Luke has the distinction amongst the gospel writers in that he is the only one to write a sequel. The first part is obviously the gospel that bears his name, the second part or sequel is the Acts of the Apostles. Luke begins his second part of his two-volume "history" of the origins and spread of early Christianity with a greeting to an apparent benefactor, Theophilus, which means "God lover" in Greek. He reminds this unknown man that his "first book was about everything Jesus began to do and teach up to the day he was lifted up" (Acts 1:1-2a). For Luke this "lifting up" or ascension is the hinge that holds his two books together, it is the pivot point between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the start of the movement he will leave behind; the church.

So let’s begin by setting the context and putting ourselves in the shoes of the disciples who had already lost Jesus once and now just as they are getting used to having him around again, after 40 days they are faced with losing him once again. Permanently. But before he goes they have a question...is this the time when the kingdom of Israel be restored? Not for the first time in their journey with Jesus we see that they see things from a very different perspective. The vision of the disciples it seems is still far too narrow, far too restricted, far too exclusive. For Jesus the canvas is so much bigger, so much broader, and so much brighter. It is not about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel but the reestablishment of the kingdom of God that is important. A kingdom that that has been brought into being in and through the incarnation of Jesus and which will be further developed by the mission, witness and service of his followers. Those disciples then and 2,000 years later by you and me.

And Jesus then gives them, and us, our marching orders. "You will receive a power from the Holy Spirit, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And indeed Luke follows that general geographical outline throughout this second volume as he tells his series of dramatic tales, beginning with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 2) and ending with Paul’s open preaching in Rome (Acts 28), which at that time would have been the "end of the earth" or Roman world in which Luke lived.

So having put ourselves in the shoes or perhaps sandals of those first disciples how are they feeling? A bit tight perhaps, not exactly a good fit, not quite as comfortable as we would have liked. I bet. It’s not hard to imagine the state of the disciples when confronted with this task...how on earth will we accomplish that? I think overwhelmed would be an understatement. Only of course Jesus does not expect them to do it in their own strength or even on their own. He leaves them with a promise. A promise that if they wait in Jerusalem, he will send the Holy Spirit to empower, equip and enable them, an event that we will celebrate next week at Pentecost.

So having reminded the disciples of who they are and what the next steps on their continuing journey of faith will entail, Jesus is lifted up, enveloped by cloud and he ascends to heaven and to the Father. And it is all the disciples can do to stand, necks craning upwards, staring as if hypnotised by events, much in the same way we might stand transfixed by a balloon drifting across an endless sky or a plane taking off with a loved one on board. They simply stand and stare. And then perhaps they would simply have stood around and waited, waited either for Jesus’ return, which the early church thought would be imminent, or stood around waiting to be transported to be with Jesus in heaven. Assuming they had made the entry list...lol.

After all it is far safer, far less demanding, to be a spectator than a witness. If we are a simply a spectator then we can procrastinate, pontificate or even to use language of only a few months ago we can prorogue, whereas to be a witness we have to be prompt, we have to have a purpose, we have to proclaim, we have to preach the good news.

Because as the final words of Jesus make clear in Acts 1, the world needs far fewer speculators and far more witnesses. Witnesses point to God’s kingdom of love and justice and compassion. Witness to it, work for it, pray for it. Work and
pray to end poverty. Work and pray to end hunger. Work and pray for a clean creation. Work and pray for an end to preventable diseases. Work and pray for gender equality. Work and pray for universal education for all God’s children. In everything we be and do we must bear witness. Bear witness to the love of God that we have known in Jesus. Bear witness to God’s rule and reign.

Off course the disciples did not have that luxury of just standing and staring, well not for too long anyway. As Jesus was being lifted up “two men in white robes stood by them,” like fellow spectators, except they have a rather abrupt question...Why are you looking up? What are you looking for? Words that almost echo those spoken by two other men in dazzling clothes in Luke’s account of the resurrection when we hear

4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.  
5 The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. (Luke 24:4-5)  

Here is a startling parallel Luke seems to be saying that Jesus has ‘risen again’ this time not from death but to the Father and the instruction to the disciples is not to look back to the past but having an assurance of what the future will hold, to press onwards in the present. Do not focus on death but on new life. Do not hesitate but instead make haste. Go on and get back to work! Don’t be distracted. Or in the words of a modern day policeman or traffic cop, “Move along now ladies and gentleman, there’s nothing to see here, move along please”

In his book The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen reminds us that our task, our call, our vocation is the "opposite of distraction." He says it is "to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God’s active presence in their lives and the lives of others. Hence, according to Henri Nouwen, the question that must guide all the activities we organise within our families of faith is “not how can we keep people busy, but how we ensure we keep them from being so busy that they can no longer hear the still small voice of God who is speaking to them."

On this Ascension Sunday I invite you to stop for a few moments and take inventory of your life. In what ways are we as individuals and as a church family still stood staring at the sky waiting for Jesus to return? In what ways are we spectators rather than witnesses? In what ways do we let the distractions of the secular world get in the way of us playing our part in bringing God’s kingdom fully to life here on earth?

In what ways can we use other words found in Luke 4 and claim them as our own as we raise our voices in proclaiming..."The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." **Amen.**

**Prayers of Intercession**

Let us pray for all those who witness to the good news of the gospel through...

- Production of daily devotional material
- Denominational magazines
- Leading of worship and preaching
- Hymn and worship song writers
- Acts of service in the local community

Lord accept our prayers in Jesus name. Amen

**Let’s finish this act of worship in song**

STF 317

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess him king of glory now; this the Father’s pleasure, that we call him Lord, who from the beginning was the mighty word.

Humbled for a season, to receive a name from the lips of sinners unto whom he came; faithfully he bore it spotless to the last, brought it back victorious when from death he passed.
Bore it up triumphant with its human light, through all ranks of creatures to the central height; to the eternal Godhead, to the Father’s throne, filled it with the glory of his triumph won.

In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true; crown him as your captain in temptation’s hour, let his will enfold you in its light and power.

With his Father’s glory Jesus comes again, angel hosts attend him and announce his reign; for all wreaths of empire meet upon his brow, and our hearts confess him king of glory now.

_Blessing_

As we await Jesus’ return in glory, let us not stand idle. Let us not simply watch and wait. But let us witness and work in service to God’s glory in all that we do and be. _Amen_