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Sermon

Ascension – the Commissioning of the Church

Acts 1:6-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

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The Ascension

The Ascent of Jesus is the commissioning of the Church for Mission.

First we need to put these three readings into their correct chronological order. We start with the gospel reading. It is from the Last Supper on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus has told his followers that he faces execution the next day. John records his prayer to the Father as he prepares for it. He has been protecting them and has brought them safely to that point. Now he entrusts them to the care of the Father.

The next is the account of the Ascension in Acts. It is 43 days later. Jesus has died on the cross, risen back to life again and been with his followers over a 40 day period. They have eaten with him a number of times. They have walked with him, talked and been taught. Finally he commissioned his disciples to go and tell people about him and ascended to heaven back to the Father.

The final reading is from a letter of Peter (who was also present on the first two occasions). He is writing about 30 years later to the gatherings of Christians which have been formed in what we now call Northern Turkey and along the southern shore of the Black Sea. In the portion we read, he encourages those who are suffering for their faith and tells of some strategies for dealing with spiritual attack.

So back to the beginning – Jesus has come to this point clearly stating that he expects, indeed knows, that he is to be tried, falsely found guilty, crucified and that he would rise again. He prays, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."¹

What can we learn about personal prayer?

V1: Father

Jesus addressed God as Father. This was unknown previously. The Jews might refer to God as Father but not address him directly by that title. Behind the Greek word for father, the Aramaic being spoken was almost certainly, *Abba*, the child's address to his/her father - like a respectful "Daddy", or "my own dear father".

This is relational prayer. It is based on intimate relationship. Not lobbying requests to a distant unknown God, but talking with someone known and loved and trusted. Jesus had that privilege as the eternal son of God.

¹ John 17:1

We are given that same intimacy when we come to God through Jesus. At the beginning of John's gospel we read,

... to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.²

And the Apostle Paul tells us in Galatians 4:6, that the Holy Spirit assures us of our sonship and puts into our hearts the desire to call God, "Abba, Father". We are given the right as Christians to approach God in the same intimacy as Jesus. Perhaps you are not sure of that? Look at verse 20: *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I in you, may they also be in us* Not just the right of children but also given the same sort of unity so that we may come boldly before the throne of grace.

Jesus lifted his eyes and prayed

It is really easy to think we are praying and in fact just sit there worrying about an issue. Or maybe we are thinking it through without actually speaking to God about it. But Jesus when he prayed spoke aloud to God. Speaking aloud really does help clarify our thoughts and keeps us on track. Otherwise sentences start, meander, run astray, stop, restart, get diverted, endure a pause of several minutes while we wonder about the bird hovering on the wind etc. Teresa of Avila said that most difficulties with prayer can be traced to behaving as if God were absent! Think about that

So address God, try speaking aloud and talk to him as someone who is present and cares about you.

Prayer Path

In one region of Africa, the first converts to Christianity were very diligent about praying. In fact, the believers each had their own special place outside the village where they went to pray in solitude. The villagers reached these "prayer rooms" by using their own private footpaths through the brush. When grass began to grow over one of these trails, it was evident that the person to whom it belonged was not praying very much.

Because these new Christians were concerned for each other's spiritual welfare, a unique custom sprang up. Whenever anyone noticed an overgrown "Prayer path," he or she would go to the person and lovingly warn, "Friend, there's grass on your path!"

What's the state of your prayer path? Is it rather overgrown with grass and weeds due to little use? Or is it a well beaten path as you regularly draw aside with God? Maybe we need to apply some spiritual roundup, kill those weeds and go aside regularly with God.

Glory

Jesus speaks much about glory and glorifying in this prayer. He says he will be glorified by being crucified – which doesn't, at first, make much sense to us. It helps to realize that the background thinking to the word is to show the true character of a person. On the Cross, Jesus showed his true nature – love – as he gave himself to save the world. In saving the world, he glorified God the Father by allowing the Father's loving nature to be made evident to those he saved.

As he continues he touches on importance matters: the authority God granted him, the gift of eternal life entrusted to him and the very nature of eternal life - which Jesus says is to know God the Father and Jesus Christ.

There are two points I want to emphasise though from verses 5 & 11.

Verse 5: "And now, Father, glorify me **in your presence** with the glory I had with you before the world began."

Verse 11: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and **I am coming to you.** Holy Father, **protect them by the power of your name**--the name you gave me--so that they may be

² John 1:12-13

one as we are one.

As Jesus looks forward he looks beyond the next few days, beyond his suffering and death, beyond the resurrection to returning to the presence of the Father. Remember Jesus is the eternal God. He was with the Father in eternity before the world or time existed and he will always exist. So he refers back to the glory he had in the Father's presence in eternity and that he is soon to re-enter that state. That leaving of this world and re-entering eternity and his full glory is the Ascension which we celebrated last Thursday – 40 days after the resurrection.

The other point is that he prays for his disciples as he is about to leave them. He has protected them but now he entrusts them to Father God and the protection of his name – his being and character.

Those two points lead onto the other two readings.

Ascension

It was, of course, Luke who wrote Acts. He finishes his gospel with the Ascension and picks up again at that point in the Acts of the Apostles. At the end of Luke's gospel Jesus says,

"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ³

In both accounts, Jesus commissions the disciples as witnesses. But they first need to be empowered for the task. He also says they need the Holy Spirit to enable them for the task – they are to wait for the gift to come. Then he is taken up into heaven.

During his ministry, Jesus had said that unless he left them the Spirit could not come. Now that he has fulfilled all that the Father had told him to do, he is to return to heaven and the Holy Spirit would be sent into all believers to allow them to continue his work.

The Ascension, then, is the event at which the Church's commission was given. Pentecost, which we celebrate next Sunday is the time when the Spirit was given to them as promised and the mission started.

Just as he sent them, we are sent to be witnesses – to tell of our experiences of Christ. But we need the Holy Spirit to give us boldness and equip us to be effective. Have you been filled with the Holy Spirit? Are you keeping topped up? The evening services are designed to help you grow in these areas. Why not come along, engage, be filled and equipped for your commission?

Suffering and Protection

When Jesus prayed for the disciples he said, "... they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name." He is concerned for their protection and for all his disciples - including us.

We should remember that we are in the midst of a cosmic conflict. If we are followers of Jesus we are part of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Darkness resists and fights against the Kingdom of God. Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." ⁴

So Peter, writing to young churches, scattered along the south coast of the Black Sea, tells the Christians not to be surprised at the painful trial they are suffering. Jesus said it too, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." ⁵

³ Luke 24:46-51

⁴ Matthew 10:34

⁵ John 16:33

Peter gives encouragement to them and us that when we stand for Christ the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us and we will know great joy when Jesus returns.

He goes on to advise us to stay humble under God's hand. That is be submissive to God's will and he will raise you up at the right time. We can cast our anxiety onto God – trust him with the things that make us anxious.

Pray that verse – like this: Lord, I take my anxiety and I send it to you. You deal with it for me, Lord. I throw it to you. Thank you that you care for me and I can trust you to deal with this matter.

It is not only neutral troubles or even persecutions which may come our way. There can be spiritual attacks. Peter tells us:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.⁶

It is when we are lacking in self-control or not paying attention we are more likely to fall for the enemy's temptations or tricks. Peter paints a picture of the enemy being like a dangerous wild beast on the lookout of easy prey. How are we to avoid harm? By being in control of ourselves and alert. When we recognise an attack we are to resist the devil.

Attacks are often fairly subtle. Most people assume bad thoughts are their own, but in fact as you mature in faith you learn that many of them are attacks which can be resisted. We do that trusting God. We can command in the authority of the name of Jesus that these spiritual attack stop. It is important that we understand we are given authority as believers in Jesus and he expects us to use that authority.

I have helped many who were suffering from persistent, negative thoughts to be rid of them by commanding them to stop in Jesus' name and they did.

Attacks may be more overt in sneering, negative words from others or even violence. The Bible is realistic about opposition. At present in the NZ, ours mostly takes the form of doubt, discouragement and fear. We need to start to use the methods the Apostles give us to resist and be strong. We can refuse to accept the attacks of the devil and stand firm in faith.

Do you remember that Jesus spoke of glory with his suffering? Do you notice that according to Peter, resisting temptation and attack, suffering for Jesus results in glory? Then the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us and we will know great joy when Jesus returns. He says it again in verses 10 & 11:

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.⁷

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*® ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁶ 1 Peter 5:8-9

⁷ 1 Peter 5:10-11