

## Sermon

### ***The Ascension: Promises, Enthronement, Empowerment***

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 23:44-53

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Last Thursday was Ascension Day. Most of us missed it! Since Ascension is an important event in the church year we are having the readings again today. We heard from Luke's accounts in the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles that in the forty days after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples multiple times, he taught them, commissioned them to preach the gospel and blessed them.

#### ***The Promise of a Bodily Return***

Then in the act of blessing them, he was taken up bodily into a cloud out of their sight. His followers were amazed –wouldn't you be? Then we hear in Acts 1:10, of two men dressed in white who stood beside them and asked them why they were looking into sky. I would look up for some time! Did they know he wasn't coming back immediately? The messengers tell them:

"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."<sup>1</sup>

They clarify that Jesus had been taken into heaven. In the incarnation, God entered into human existence in a human body. In the Ascension, Jesus - already in his resurrection body - was taken up into the presence of the Father. Humanity was taken into the Godhead! We have a High Priest interceding for us who is able to sympathise with our sufferings and weaknesses.<sup>2</sup>

And Jesus will return – that is a major promise of the New Testament. He will return in his human, resurrection body. Paul tells us in the 1 Thessalonians:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>3</sup>

The Book of Revelation echoes the same idea:

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.<sup>4</sup>

You can have confidence that Jesus will return. It may be in our lifetime, it may not be. But he will come.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:11

<sup>2</sup> Heb 4.15–16

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 1:7

## ***Enthronement***

What else is understood about the Ascension? The Apostles understood it as the enthronement of Jesus beside God the Father.

On the day of Pentecost Peter preached:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.<sup>5</sup>

Again before the Sanhedrin, Peter said,

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."<sup>6</sup>

Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:20-23:

"God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."

To be seated at the right hand of a sovereign is to have equality with the sovereign. Paul is saying that Jesus is equal to God the Father and that he rules. This position is above all other authorities whether rulers, authorities, powers or dominions. It is above every title that can be given.

So if you wonder is Jesus greater than this or that spiritual power – the answer is: yes he is. If you wonder is Jesus greater than this or that social or governmental power – the answer is that he is above all powers and authorities. He himself said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."<sup>7</sup>

However, I think we can be confused about God's sovereignty. If Jesus has all authority does that mean everything that happens is his perfect will? Many people take it that way and then blame God for all the bad things that happen in the world. But this is to neglect the fact that there is rebellion and disobedience to God's will – we call it sin and all humanity is infected with that disease. Because God has given us freewill not everything that happens is His will.

In any kingdom, the sovereign has all authority but not everyone obeys him. God gave the Promised Land to Israel, saying he would "give them every place where they set their foot." However, it took years for them to subdue it. Authority can exist without being fully established or exerted. We are in that phase with Jesus. His kingdom has come but not fully come. Commission is to extend his kingdom. We do that as we use his delegated authority to call people and situations into obedience to Christ. When we preach the gospel, we are calling people into the obedience of Christ. When we pray for healing we are using the authority Jesus delegated to us to call the situation back into line with God's plan.

A week ago, I was guest preacher at "Jesus Heals" a local healing event. Helen, James and I prayed for a young man who had bad eye trouble: he had visible cataracts, an abrasion of the cornea and other problems I didn't understand. His eyesight was very poor and his longing was to be able to see his infant daughter's face. Helen tested his sight and he could only read a word if it was about the size of her phone screen. After the first prayer, he could read another word at about that half the size. We prayed several more times and he was reading what might be called extra large print instead of needing huge letters. The next day we received an email from his parents-in-law saying,

Be encouraged there is progress with the guy who had an eye problem. We just want to let you know what is happening with him ... we are watching with open mouths at what he has been doing this afternoon! He has been shifting boxes, carrying them down stairs, carrying chairs walking BACKWARDS down stairs, packing and unpacking boxes and stacking them under the house, he's moving with

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:32-33

<sup>6</sup> Acts 5:30-32

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18

confidence and is like a mini tornado moving fast around the place, not tripping once over the stuff scattered on the deck getting repacked. To look at his eyes, his wife can't see the cataracts at all. They look clear, not their normal cloudy selves. He's happy in himself and is different. These are things he couldn't do before Friday! God is doing a work ... Hallelujah!!!

My longing is that he will be fully healed.

Paul continues in verse 22:

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Jesus is appointed as the head of the Church, which is his body. He is also head over everything. That means our head is the head over everything else. For us he rules everything!

### ***Empowerment***

At the Ascension there was the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift that would empower and embolden them.

The ascension was necessary for the Holy Spirit to be given to us. Jesus said in John 16:7 "It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Turning to the passage from Ephesians, Paul wrote of his constant prayer for God to give them the Holy Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they might know him better.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives this knowledge. Scholarship does not result in knowing God. We need the Spirit of Christ to discern spiritual things – the natural mind alone cannot understand God's truth. We may have to do some hard thinking, but the breakthroughs come as gifts – *aha* moments. St Paul referred to this need for divine revelation and wisdom in 1 Corinthians 2:

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.<sup>8</sup>

Do you know that spiritual revelation? Do you know the Spirit of God? He is not to be feared for he is the presence of Christ with us as we go through life. Won't you ask for more openness to his presence with you? As we are in the final lead up to Pentecost this year, why not pray that more engagement with the Holy Spirit in your life?

Along with the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave responsibility to the Church. In his physical absence, it was up to the Church to follow him and bring in the kingdom – as it still is today. This is to be in the power of the Spirit. And we are equipped with the gifts that he gives the Church.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4 that when Jesus ascended he gave gifts to the Church of Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers. Ephesians 4:8: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."

We have seen the Ascension gives us the promise of Jesus' return with the wonder that humanity is taken into the Godhead, declares the Enthronement of Jesus and our Empowerment with the Holy Spirit and his gifts.

The end of Mark's gospel tells of the commission to go and spread the gospel: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."<sup>9</sup> Then follows:

"[Jesus] was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:13-14

<sup>9</sup> Mark 16:15

accompanied it.”<sup>10</sup>

The outcome is action! The disciples went out and told people about Jesus. But note that comment: “And the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word.”

Church, because Jesus has ascended, because he has all power and authority we are commissioned to tell people about him, who he is and what he has done in our lives. Recently, the Hope Project distributed another booklet. You may have received one in your letterbox. They have sent us a supply of them so you can use them for help friends or contacts learn about Jesus. At the end of the service, we will give those out. Do take one and read so you can be ready to give it to someone who would benefit. There are plenty of them, so you can ask for more if you want them. God bless you as you tell others about Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 16:19-20