

# Sunday 7th January 2024 - Sunday Service

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good morning, everybody. Thank you for praying for us. Please keep praying, we need it! Wonderful. As Richard said, we're starting a new series in Acts this year. And in order! to understand what's going on in Acts, as you probably guessed, we're going back to the end of Luke. Luke being the writer of Acts. The two sort of go together, the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. And this morning is going to be a bit of a rollercoaster, right?

There's your warning. Hold on to your seats. It's going to be a bit of a rollercoaster as we think about the ascension, which is really just a big word for Jesus going to heaven after his resurrection. Before we do that, let's pray. Let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you that we can start this new year with you. We thank you that this Sunday morning we are not just a collection of people gathered together around a common set of values, but we are united by you, a person who has come to be with us, died to save us, Lord rose to encourage us and is ascended and seated on the throne, their ruling for us. Please help us to see you this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You probably all experienced the rains and the flooding this week. And some of you will know that we were nearly flooded out this week as well. We had the buckets on standby, all hands on deck, sandbags. Some of you came and helped us out. Gareth and his pool pump saved the day. I don't know how many litres of water pumped around the side of our house. And that was the situation. And we did what you're supposed to do, which is, you know, phone the water board and say, well, you haven't serviced the storm drains and now we're in the situation where there's nearly water running through the corridors. Can you please come and help? And what did we get? An automated response system, as you so often do. Press one if your kitchen looks like the Black Lagoon. Press two if your new puppy has a new swimming pool. Press three if you have the creek in your house, but not the paddle. That's what it felt like. And eventually they said, yeah, we'll try and get to you within 24 hours. But, you know, they weren't there when we needed them. They'd left. They'd all gone home. Of course, there are much worse examples, aren't there? Kind of running down them. What about work when the CEO leaves, the boss goes? And you're left to pick up the pieces. Or maybe the pastor, who's meant so much to you, finishes. Or maybe you come home one day and there's a note pinned to the fridge from your spouse and that's it. They're gone. The person that you pinned your hopes on just isn't there. And maybe the same, we feel the same about the Lord. You know, God's God is out of office on. You have that feeling? But I need you now. You know, the flood's about to pour through the door and irreparable damage is going to happen to my life. And where are you? So this passage, these passages touches on one of our deepest fears, fear of just being abandoned, being left. And if you think about it, lots of people scoff at our faith in this way as well, don't they? You know, oh, you follow Jesus. Where's he then? And here we are in Acts, at the beginning of the rest of history, as it were, and Jesus leaves. What's going on? I hope you have your finger in the Bible in between Luke and Acts because we're going to flick between the two. Here we are. What does it say in verse 51 of Luke chapter 24? While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. And we can imagine how the apostles felt, can't we? Now what? How are we going to build the kingdom of good news when the king has gone? It's like a president winning an election or a prime minister winning an election and then leaving the country. Just makes no sense at all. What are they going to do? Maybe just go back to their hometowns. Peter will become a fisherman again. But no, that's not what happens. Look at verse 52. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. See, when we read this at first, we think Jesus is in the middle of giving a blessing, which means giving us joy, giving us what we need to love and serve him. And it's kind of interrupted and he's taken off to heaven by a band of angels. But actually, that doesn't really make sense, does it? Because if verse 52 says they return to Jerusalem with great joy, joy, then something else is going on here. They go back to Jerusalem, the

scene of the tragedy, with great joy. So what's going on? They know something we don't. And that's the heart of the message today, really. Jesus leaving is good news because he goes for us, he goes before us,

and he is more with us. Did you get that? Jesus leaving is good news because he goes for us, he goes before us, and he is more with us. So first of all, he goes for us. So we read that passage and we think, blessing interrupted, but the apostles seem to have the joy anyway. What's going on? Well, we're going to do a little bit of flicking around in scripture to understand what's going on. I'm going to read out the verses. Don't feel you need to look them up, but if you've got fast fingers, you can try. Here we go. Ephesians chapter one. Speaking about God's power, it says this, God's power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms. Far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come. [ 6 : 23 ] And God placed all things under Jesus' feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church. Jesus leaving is for the church. Well, how does that help us? Because of where he is.

He is seated at the right hand of God on the throne in the place of power and he can do more there. Now, if you know your Old Testament and your New Testament, you will know that Jesus is described as the ultimate prophet and priest and king. He is the truth teller, he is the mediator and he is the ruler. And each of those things describe something that Jesus does for us. And each of those things he can do better in heaven. He doesn't just speak the truth to his followers verbally, locally, but he speaks the truth to each of our hearts directly by his Holy Spirit, whom he sends from heaven.

And Ephesians 4 verse 8 tells us exactly why it is better that he is a king above than a king below. Here it is. To each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, when he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

See, here on earth, he's the king anointed. He's the heir apparent. He's the next in line to the throne. But there, he is the king crowned and enthroned. And from there, he gives us royal gifts. And those royal gifts are primarily each other, brothers and sisters, and also talents to serve one another with.

So he's a better king there. Here, he is a priest offering himself on the cross for us, isn't he? What's he doing in heaven?

[ 8 : 32 ] Hebrews 7 and 9 tell us. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary when he went up, made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one, referring to the temple in the Old Testament.

He entered heaven itself. What does he do there? Now to appear for us in God's presence. In Hebrews 7, 25. Therefore, he's able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Jesus is there as a high priest, now perfect, praying for us. If you're going into a mediation or a negotiation, who do you want on your side?

Think about that for a minute. You want someone who's totally committed to your cause, don't you? Negotiating for you. And you want someone who knows the other person inside out.

That would be a helpful thing. And you want someone to whom the other person is completely committed. Wants to keep them on side.

[ 9 : 47 ] Then they're on your side. And they have all the info on the other side. And the other side has to keep them on side. Did you follow all of those sides? I mean, where are you going to find someone like that?

That's exactly what we have in Jesus, isn't it? Someone who's so committed to our cause that he was willing to die for our sins. Someone who knows the Father inside out.

And someone who has been eternally loved by the Father since before the beginning of time. And that is who stands at the Father's right hand on our behalf. He's there for us.

He's like Joseph. Remember the story of Joseph? He gets shipped off to Egypt by his brothers. Powerless. Absent.

And all the dreams that were written about him in the stars seem to come to nothing. But why? Why does he go there? God gives him the power in order that he can provide for his people.

[ 10 : 53 ] For their safety. For their growth. To make sure that they get justice. That's Jesus. So when we feel powerless, the ascended Jesus reminds us that there is power on high to help us.

So in going up, he isn't suddenly interrupted in his blessing of us. Prevented from giving us everything he wants to give us. No, that is the completion of his blessing of us. And Acts 3.21 tells us that ultimately he's gone up so that all things will be restored. Made new. Put right. And that's even good if you're not a Christian.

Because it means there's somebody competent in charge who is going to put all the wrongs right. And it means that there's still time to come to him in faith and accept him as the king who reigns above.

Who died for your wrongs. So that he can make you part of the kingdom of good news. So Jesus leaving is good news because he goes for us.

[12:04] But secondly, it's good news because he goes before us. See if my clicker works. Here we go. Don't know if you're a film buff.

I quite like a film now and again. And there's lots of films, aren't there, where the hero has to go. And what does he always say to the person he's looking after?

I'll come back. I'll come back. Here's one. Anybody name that film? If you're doing better than me, I don't know which one it is.

I shall return. Here's another one, slightly more modern. This is Atonement. Filmed with James McAvoy and Keira Knightley. I will return. I love you the way you're supposed to be loved. And here's everybody's favourite.

I'll be back. Jesus leaving is good news because he goes before us and he promises to come back. Jesus goes to sort things out.

[13:05] And he's going to come back. How is he going to sort things out? And how is his coming back good news? And how is it that he's going before us? Well, just think about this for a minute.

There is right now, at this moment, a human being seated on the throne of the universe. A human being. Just think about that for a minute.

Now, we've thought about Jesus becoming human at Christmas just recently, haven't we? But Jesus doesn't ditch his humanity at the door of heaven. See, the incarnation doesn't end.

It's completed when Jesus sits down on the throne. He's both God and man in heaven forever. And that means human beings can go bodily into God's house, doesn't it?

Because that's what Jesus has done and he's a human being. Acts chapter 1, verse 11. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky?

[14:14] 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. See, if he can go there, then we can go there.

Because he is human and so are we. And if we follow him, then the Bible says we are one with him. And more than that, Jesus has promised to come back and take us where he has gone.

If you know your Bibles, you'll be thinking of the same passage that I'm about to read to you. It's from John chapter 14, verse 2. My father's house has many rooms.

If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me.

So that you also may be where I am. And that changes our view of eternity, doesn't it? It's not pie in the sky when you die. It's not sort of floaty, translucent beings sitting on clouds.

[15:22] No, it's human beings going home. Because he's gone ahead of us. You see in verse 9, it says here, After he said this, he was taken up from before their eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

And that word hid is supposed to prompt a connection in our minds to something else in the Bible. Colossians chapter 3, verses 2 and 3.

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Did you get that? That our lives are hidden with Christ, because Christ is our life. And when he returns, we will appear with him in glory.

And in some senses, the Bible says it's so real, we're already there with him. Ephesians 2, verse 6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

[16:39] There's a Dutch theologian that I love called Herman Bavinck. He summarises it very simply like this. His ascension prepares ours. So when we feel purposeless, directionless, and we wonder where's the place for us, the ascended Jesus reminds us that there is a place.

There is a place for us to which we are guaranteed to go, because Jesus has promised to come and take us there. And that's why Stephen sees the ascended Jesus later in Acts.

You know that story? Stephen's being stoned to death for his faith. And he's given a vision of heaven. And what does he see? He sees the ascended Jesus sitting on the throne. Why? Because that's what we need to see in the sadness and in the struggle, because it's where we're going. Richard Sibbes looks at it this way. He says, Jesus was taken from where he was humbled and where he prayed on the Mount of Olives up to glory to show us that the places where we pray, where we suffer, our sick bed, our prison, our lowest moment, will be like the Mount of Olives for us, because it's from there that God takes us to glory.

So Jesus going is good news, because he goes before us. And it's also a little bit scary, because when he comes back, the Bible tells us, it will be to call the world to account.

[ 18 : 23 ] That doesn't mean he's going to weigh up your good deeds against your bad deeds, as if our good deeds could ever force God to let us into his holy presence.

No. He's going to ask, was I number one? Was your heart mine? Are your sins forgiven?

Thirdly, Jesus leaving is good news, because when he goes, he's with us more. Maybe you're thinking, okay, I hear what you're saying, but none of this actually solves the problem that Jesus isn't here.

Where is he when I need him? And the Bible's answer is, more here than ever. How is that?

How does that work? And the answer is hinted at in Luke, and explained in Acts. So flick back to Luke chapter 24, verse 49.

[ 19 : 31 ] I'm going to send you what my Father has promised. And then back to Acts chapter 1, verse 4. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command, do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father has promised.

So what is it that God has promised that means that when Jesus leaves, he is more with us than before? Keep reading. Verse 5.

And the same in verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

So Jesus is more with us because he is with us by his Holy Spirit. Jesus has promised to send the Holy Spirit to baptize us, to soak into us, if you like, in a way that is impossible with Jesus physically.

You see, if he hadn't gone, then he couldn't actually really be with me, could he? Or with you.

Because he would have just stayed a local Messiah in Palestine, subject to the physical limitations of his human body.

[ 20 : 48 ] He couldn't really be with me. He couldn't really be with all Christians. No. In order to be with all of us, he has to leave and send his Holy Spirit.

And so the ascension, Jesus going up to heaven, shows us that we're not less connected to Jesus than before, but actually more. Because now we don't depend on the physical connection anymore. Snapchat offers us physically unrestricted connection, doesn't it? But it's only really face deep. It's kind of an advance on where we were, and yet it's still miles away from what we were meant for. But through his Spirit coming to live in us, if we trust him, Jesus offers us a spiritual, whole person, integrated, soul-deep connection to himself.

Here's how Bavinck puts it. Physically and locally restricted, time and space-bound contact with Jesus makes way for spiritual, inward, deep, unbreakable, eternal fellowship.

[ 22 : 03 ] That's what it means to have his Holy Spirit in us. How can we understand this? It's hard, isn't it? I want you to do something for me.

Just think of a tree. Do you think of a tree? I'm pretty sure you're thinking about it with its leaves on, like this, right? But is the tree any less there when the leaves fall off in the winter?

No. Signs of life aren't so obvious, are they? But actually, we need the leaves to fall to see the true structure and shape of that tree, to appreciate the solid girth of the trunk as it grows, to see the direction that it is growing in.

And so it is with Jesus. His body is not here, but his Spirit absolutely is, and that enables us to know him better than before, even if it seems less.

So when we feel disconnected and alone, Jesus' ascension offers us intimate, eternal relationship with him if we come in repentance and faith.

[ 23 : 16 ] So Jesus leaving is good news because he's with us more. When he goes up, Jesus completes the final movement of his plan.

Down to the womb, up to the cross, down to the tomb, up to the crown. And each movement is part of the good news.

And that is why Christians have had the ascension of Jesus, Jesus going up into heaven, as part of our basic beliefs right from the very beginning. Peter, if you read his sermons in Acts, mentions it every time.

Here's the Apostles' Creed, which is the earliest. Bhavank again says something very interesting. He says, Jesus no longer belongs to this world, but is in transition to another way of living and working, one which is fit for where he's going, fit for heaven.

[ 24 : 35 ] And that's an example for us. Just think about if you have a promotion, or remember back to when you graduated from secondary school and you went to university, or from primary school to secondary school. It's a little bit like that, because it's still the same you, but now you're doing your things in a different way and in a different place.

And that's what we need to do when we follow Jesus. We need to transition to a new way of living and working. What does that look like? Well, in some ways, the whole of Acts is going to show us. And we'll see more next week. Well, let's get a few clues right now. Look at verses 10 and 11 of Acts chapter 1. They were looking up intently into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

Men of Galilee, they said. Why do you stand here looking into the sky? So whatever the right response is, it definitely isn't standing around looking at the sky. Is it?

Now, I think we can translate that and think, well, the right thing to do is not to become so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use, as the saying goes.

[ 25 : 48 ] Then what should we do? Well, I think the reaction of the disciples at the end of Luke helps us. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. So the right response is worship and praise God. Worship doesn't mean act holy and sing old-fashioned songs, does it?

I think we know that now. Worship is a lifestyle. It means living your life for God, bringing him into every part of it and allowing him to speak out of every part of it.

It means being an active member of his family. For most of us, it will mean be baptized and join the membership of your local church. Because that's where we serve God, where we serve one another with our gifts.

And it also means prayer. Acts chapter 1, verse 4. He gives the command, do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised.

[ 26 : 54 ] Now, you remember the last time he asked the disciples to wait with him? They fell asleep. And what were they supposed to be doing? They were supposed to be praying with him. Watch and pray, he says.

And the disciples have got it now. Because if you look at verse 14, a little bit further on from our passage, they all join together constantly in prayer.

Thanking God for his goodness and his grace. Bringing our needs to him. Asking him for help to transition in our way of living from the old way.

And especially this week, the week of prayer. What better week? What better week to rejoice in the good news that Jesus is on the throne?

Because that is the truth, isn't it? That is the bold truth. Jesus is on the throne. Jesus has gone there for us, before us, and to be more with us.

[ 27 : 52 ] He has won. And it is only a matter of time, literally a matter of time, before he returns to bring us home and to judge the quick and the dead, as the old-fashioned language has it.

And therefore, what we need to do this year in 2024, more than anything else, is to do as the disciples did. Live for him, worship him, pray to him.

Let's do that now. Lord, we thank you. We thank you that the Bible tells us that Jesus going and being enthroned is good news for us.

We thank you that you are there interceding for us with the Father. We thank you that you will come back from there and take us to be with you forever.

And we thank you that by your Spirit, you are more with us than before. We pray that you would help us to give you our lives and to be with you in prayer often.

[ 28 : 55 ] And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.