

The ascension of Jesus

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[0 : 00] And the reading this morning is from Hebrews chapter 10 and beginning at verse 11. That's to be found on page 1210 of the Church Bibles.

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.

For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. So our second reading is from Luke 24, beginning at verse 44.

And Jesus said to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[1 : 29] You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven.

And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. Good morning, my name's Andy Meadows.

I'm the Youth and Children's Minister here, and it's great to be here with you this morning. I wonder, if you had to draw a picture of Jesus' life, what picture would you draw?

I half thought about bringing in paper and pens to get you to do this, but then I realised it wasn't a youth group or Sunday club. Some people's heads dropped then, sorry, maybe afterwards, maybe afterwards.

[2 : 39] Maybe you draw one of the miracles. Maybe you draw Jesus turning water into wine. Maybe you think back to Christmas and you draw the nativity scene.

Well, maybe not if you can't draw animals, but you might draw Jesus on the cross. You might draw Jesus appearing to his disciples after he's risen from the dead and him eating fish on a beach.

How many of us would think to draw the ascension? Probably not many. It's not one thing that kind of leaps into our mind when we think about Jesus' life.

It often gets overlooked. It feels like a bit of an add-on, a gospel appendix, a theological footnote, a PS at the bottom of an email. Maybe we think this way because we just don't know what to do with it.

We kind of know we know what the cross is about, that Jesus taking our sin on himself and God's punishment. We know what the resurrection is about, Jesus conquering death, and by implication sin.

[3 : 44] But the ascension? What's that about? What's the significance there? Is it just a good night from me? Is it just any more than an author tying up a novel?

Well, maybe you're here today looking into the Christian faith, and you find the ascension that Jesus rising into the clouds, back to heaven, just a bit weird. Let's be honest, it is a bit weird.

It is a bit weird. And maybe you think it's a bad strategy for Christianity. If Jesus stayed on earth, walking around, showing himself to people, you think, well, great, many more would believe.

But Jesus ascending into heaven, it's like subbing your best player after ten minutes of the game.

It's a bad strategy. Well, if that's you, then please do also listen to last week's sermon about how we can know Jesus now through his word, the Bible.

And the big question I want us to think about tonight, this morning, is so what? So what? Jesus ascended into heaven.

[4 : 52] So what? Why should I care? Well, we're going to see that Jesus going back to heaven is not bad strategy, but good news. And Luke thinks it's good news and we should care a great deal about it.

Luke opens his gospel by telling us he's written, he's carefully investigated all these things about Jesus and that he's written them down so we can have certainty of the things we've been taught. And so in Luke's gospel, there's no padding. There's no filling. He's not been given a word count by his publisher that he had to hit. So the ascension must be important.

Important enough for him to write about it. Significant for us to have certainty. And everything has been building to this point.

Have a look on your outline of the service on the back of the service sheet there. You'll find out where we're going with this. Luke 9, 51. When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

[6 : 00] That's interesting, isn't it? He doesn't say when the days drew near for him to die on the cross or the days drew near for him to rise from the dead, but the days drew near for him to be taken up. Everything is building towards the ascension.

The journey to Jerusalem is not a journey to the cross. It's a journey to glory in heaven via the cross and ascension. And that's why Jesus ascended the way he did.

I take he could have just vanished from their sight like he did earlier on in the chapter. But he wanted to do it this way. He led them out to the hills specifically to let them know do not expect any more resurrection appearances.

This is it. I am going back to the Father. Well, so what? He ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God. Why is that good news?

Well, two things why it's good news. Firstly, on your handout there, Jesus the ascended priest. Jesus the ascended priest. Look down at Luke 24, verse 50.

[7 : 08] Then he led them out as far as Bethany and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from heaven and was carried up into heaven.

Jesus led the disciples out from where he started a triumphal entry on the side of Mount Olives. And he lifted up his hands and he blessed them. It's a very distinct sentence, but it holds great significance.

Because look down at the verse there on your service sheet, Leviticus 9. Then Aaron lifted up his hands towards the people and blessed them.

And he came down from the offering, the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. We're back in the Old Testament there. Not long after, God's people have been rescued from slavery and Egypt.

And the way for God to be able to be in relationship with his people is through the tabernacle, which is later on a temple where God dwelt. Because God is holy and he cannot look on sin and the people are sinful, they're corrupted, they cannot come into God's presence.

[8 : 21] Sin leads to death and death is the just penalty for sin. And so the only way for people to come before God's presence is through a sacrifice. That something else dies in their place.

Something else takes the punishment that should have been theirs before they can go in. That's what the sacrifice represents. And this was Aaron's job.

He was a priest. And verse 22, after giving the various sacrifices, he would turn to the people and bless them and lift his hands up towards them. God's acceptance. God is in favor of ye.

And Jesus too lifted up his hands towards his disciples. Before he was carried up into heaven, he offered a priestly blessing. His ascension is bringing them into God's presence.

And this understanding of what's going on here in the light of the Old Testament is at the heart of the book of Hebrews. The writer of the Hebrews wants to encourage his readers not to turn back from following Jesus.

[9 : 25] That it's better to live his way than the way beforehand. And there's loads of places we can go to in Hebrews. It's basically all over Hebrews. But I've chosen just a couple.

And turn back to Hebrews 10. Keep a finger in Luke. Turn back to our reading of Hebrews 10. Verse 11. 11 there. And every priest stands daily at his temple, at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins.

The priest stands at the temple. Their work is never done. They had job security. They were never redundant because these sacrifices could never take away sin. You get to the front of the queue. You say a quick hello to the priest. You give your sacrifice. They sacrifice it. Great. You're blessed by God. Great. Now join the back of the queue again for all the good it did. And you get to the front again. It's a continual line.

But look down at verse 12. Look how Jesus is different. But when Jesus, when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.

[10:39] For by a single offering he was perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

When Jesus, the great high priest, offered his sacrifice, his own body, the body that took on our sin and punishment that sin deserved, he ascended and sat down at the right hand of God.

Sitting here is a picture of finished work. You get home from work. You get home from school. What do you do? You sit down. You sit down and do that noise.

You work hard in the garden. You come in. You sit down. You frantically chase after the children each day. You put them to bed. You sit down with your glass of wine.

Your work is finished. You may even put your feet on the table in front of you if you're allowed. I don't know. I don't know what it's like. The rules are in your house. But it's this picture of finished work that was going on here in these verses.

The priest stands at the temple. He's always on his feet. The work is never done. But Jesus sat down. Not just in a room in a tabernacle but in heaven itself at the right hand of God.

[11:52] His work is done. And he didn't just put his feet on the table in front of him but on his enemies. Jesus ascended into heaven. So what?

What does that mean for us? Here, today, 2016. Well firstly it means mission accomplished. The price is paid. On Good Friday and Easter Sunday remember sin has been dealt with.

And when we put our trust in him our sin is washed away. We are cleansed. And Jesus is our great high priest who offered a complete sacrifice in his death on the cross.

His redeeming work is finished. He rose again from the dead to secure his eternal priesthood.

Mediating between us and God. And he sat down at God's right hand in God's bringing us into God's presence.

And secondly Jesus' death does not simply deal with sin but deals with sin so that we can be in God's presence. Look down at Hebrews 9 on your sheet.

[13:02] for Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands which are copies of the true things but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

When Jesus died the temple curtain separating God and man was split in two. People could be in relationship with God again. And when Jesus ascended into heaven he is our priest carrying us into God's presence.

Securing a permanent presence before God. Our salvation is certain as long as Christ is in heaven. That's encouraging. And we know Jesus will never leave heaven again until he brings heaven with him when he comes again.

That gives us great certainty and comfort when we feel the ongoing weight of sin. When we doubt our salvation.

Am I really saved? Does God really love me? Am I really accepted by him? Well in those dark times we remember the cross the resurrection and the ascension.

[14:19] That Jesus is in the presence of God on our behalf. He is the complete sacrifice who takes away our sin forever. He is the eternal priest and his ministry never ends.

While he is in heaven we are secure in his family. He does not step out of God's presence when we mess up. And so for those of us trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection here this morning it's like we're in two places at the same time.

Here 2016 we are in Dulwich but in a real sense we're in heaven. We're in heaven. When you get home and cook your lunch you're in heaven.

When you're in exam room wanting to burst into tears you're also in heaven. When you're struggling to live a godly life at work you're in heaven. Colossians 3 Paul says your life is hid with Christ on high.

In Christ we are in the very presence of God. He is our great high priest offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice and ascended into heaven bringing us with him for our good.

[15 : 31] That's the first so what? Jesus ascended into heaven sat down in the right hand of the father so what? He is our great high priest the ascended priest. And the second so what is that Jesus is the enthroned king.

The enthroned king. Now what was Jesus doing last night when you were sleeping? What was Jesus doing when you made your first cup of tea this morning?

When you drove to church? What was Jesus doing? What's he doing now in fact? Well he's ruling. He's ruling the world. While you slept Jesus was busy ruling the world subduing his enemies and putting them under his feet.

That's a pretty bold claim isn't it? That's pretty blazing. That's pretty outrageous. It's a bold claim that Jesus is king over the world because we don't see it nowadays in the world.

The world does not recognize Jesus as king. Look at the top news stories on your BBC news app. You won't see a story there about Jesus reigning. You read the evening standard on the way home from work.

[16 : 41] You won't see a story there about Jesus being king. It's not going to be the top news item on the 10 o'clock news. Yet throughout Luke's gospel Jesus is proclaimed as God's promised king.

We remember at Christmas the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that her son will be the son of the most high. He will have the throne of his father David and he will reign over the descendants of Jacob forever.

His kingdom will never end. And the ascension cements Jesus' enthronement as king. when was the last time you were on a plane?

Maybe a business trip or a holiday? And we get very different perspectives from the ground and from the air. When you take off on ground level you might have rain, you may have storm Katie blowing, you have lightning maybe, wind.

But then the plane goes through the clouds and you get above the clouds and it's bright sunshine and you're cruising. There's two different perspectives.

[17 : 44] And that's the movement we make as we look at our last passage, Daniel 7. Luke describes the ascension from below, the ground level view of an ordinary looking guy rising into the clouds.

But Daniel describes the ascension from above. He shows us what happened as Jesus arrived into heaven. And so look down at Daniel 7.

Let me read that. I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient of days and he and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all people's nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away. And his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Now not many of us were alive when Queen Elizabeth II was enthroned in 1953. I won't ask for a show of hands. But it was a big state occasion. Dignitaries from around the world came to Westminster Abbey. It was a day of celebration. People had a day off work.

[19 : 02] People lined the streets. There was parties up and down the country. And while Daniel's vision hundreds of years before Jesus was a coronation ceremony.

It was fulfilled as Jesus ascended into heaven. As Acts 1 we read at the start of our service he ascended onto the clouds. The clouds took him and hid him from their sight. In verse 13 of Daniel 7 the son of man came with the clouds and he came before the ancient of days.

God himself. Jesus himself calls himself the son of man in Luke 22 and when Stephen is stoned in Acts 7 he looks up and he sees the son of man at the right hand of God.

Jesus enters heaven he comes before God and he's given all authority. He's given a dominion a kingdom that will never end. The king promised by Gabriel at the start of Luke's gospel is enthroned as he is taken up at the end and now he reigns.

But what does that look like in 21st century London? In a world that does not recognize that Jesus is king how is he ruling? Well Jesus reigns and his enemies are defeated as people come to know him as their lord and saviour.

[20 : 26] He extends his rule now with a going out of the gospel message. In the bit that was read earlier in Luke 24 just before he ascends he tells his peace sends his disciples out and preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations.

When King George VI died Queen Elizabeth became queen she immediately became queen she didn't need the ceremony and her rule was proclaimed throughout the lands where she is head in Australia in Canada New Zealand South Africa United kingdom she is queen and her coronation ceremony proclaimed and enthroned her as queen that she rules and likewise the mission of the church now our mission here in Dulwich is to proclaim that there is a king on the throne a king Jesus who rules and when a friend a colleague or a family member comes to know Jesus puts their trust in him his rule is being extended if you talk to a colleague or a family member about how you became a Christian Jesus reign is being announced he ascended into heaven he is sat down at the right hand of the father so what at the moment

Jesus reign doesn't look impressive in fact it looks pretty weak in the world today and when we feel weak when it looks weak Jesus rule is denied we see a world around us in chaos well then we need to remember the perspective above the clouds as well as below Jesus is seated in the heavenly realms he is ruling he is king he's enthroned he's been given an everlasting kingdom he's been given the keys and now he is working to subdue his enemies and extending his rule waiting until he comes back again on the clouds as the angels pronounced that he'll make his enemies a footstool for his feet the beginning and end of Luke's gospel act does great bookends for the message of Jesus Luke's gospel starts with Jesus coming down from heaven it ends with him going back up into heaven it starts with a priest Zechariah and

God's people in a temple it ends with Jesus the great high priest and God's people in a temple it starts with a king being announced and it ends with a king being enthroned reigning forever it starts with an angel announcing that Jesus will be good news of great joy for all nations it ends Luke 24 with the disciples having great joy as they worship God they worship Jesus in fact that's the only reference in Luke's gospel to the disciples worshiping Jesus that's quite a radical not the cross nor the resurrection draw this out but the ascension or maybe it's all three together they worshiped him and for us to knowing why the ascension is such good news for us today should lead us to worship in great joy just like the disciples because it brings great comfort and certainty in an uncertain world when we are uncertain about our salvation we look to Jesus the ascended priest who is in heaven on our behalf we are in the very presence of God through him we can be certain that we are in his presence and the penalty for sin has been paid he is our representative and where we are uncertain about who is in charge of the world we look to

Jesus the enthroned king who's been given that dominion that shall not be destroyed and that rule now is going out with the outgoing of the gospel so when we see the apostles creed when we say it again at church we can affirm with great joy that Jesus rose from the dead and he ascended into heaven and he is sat down at the right hand of the father his work is finished sin is paid for and now we are to take this message out proclaim his rule to the nations let's pray heavenly father we give you great thanks and praise for Jesus ascending into heaven we thank you that through him our presence before you is secure father when we doubt please reassure when we doubt about the state of this world who's in charge please comfort us knowing that you are king that one day you will come again and you will judge amen you