

Sunday 12th May 2024 - The Ascension of Jesus

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[0 : 00] I don't know how quickly you think this year is already going, whether it's me just getting old and time goes relatively faster, doesn't it, the older you get. But we're into May already, aren't we? And Christmas just feels like a blink ago.

Easter was, what, six weeks ago, just that as well. I don't know if you've got any chocolate eggs left, any chocolate eggs on the shelf. Oh, I'm impressed, I'm impressed. Well kept, well kept. This six weeks that we've had since Easter, that's the period of time that there was between Jesus's resurrection from the dead and the event that we're going to look at today, which is Jesus's ascension into heaven.

And although it's sometimes a bit of an overlooked event, the ascension, I think, is obviously a pretty crucial part of the Jesus story. So much so that the writer, Luke, he records the event not once, but twice in the Bible.

Once in the end of his gospel and once in the beginning of the book called The Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to his gospel. So, a bit of a Bible bonus today because we're going to check out both of those readings, both of those versions of the ascension, which means that the first of today's two-for-one texts is the final few verses of Luke's gospel.

And there's a clip of it which we'll watch on the screens. When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them.

[1 : 32] While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. So, a brief account there from Luke's gospel of how Jesus left his disciples.

And in Luke's words at the end there, Jesus, he says, was taken up into heaven. But then in Luke's second account in the book of Acts, he fleshes things out a bit.

And he kicks off this story like this. He says, in my former book, this is Luke's gospel. Luke says, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.

After giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.

[2 : 56] He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command.

He said, do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John, baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Then his disciples, they gathered around him and asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus said to them, it's not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up 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?

[4 : 13] This same Jesus who's been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you've seen him go into heaven. And the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a half a mile walk from the city.

So as I say, here we get a fair bit more detail in the book of Acts. But I guess if we're honest, this whole story of the ascension, this whole episode, it's nothing if not a little bit strange, is it really?

I mean, Jesus saying goodbye by seemingly floating up into the sky. And really, it's quite hard to imagine for a start, but any sort of art or films which have been made depicting this event, it's hard, I think, for it not to look a bit naff, really, the way they do it.

So whether it's Jesus, this is one picture I found of a kind of six-pack Marvel superhero Jesus going up. It's meant, you know, in the darkness there. Who knows? Who knows? There's one, this one here, a bit of an older one, but Jesus' feet just popping out from below the clouds.

Obviously, his sandals are dropped off by that point. But yeah, that's one interpretation of how it looks. And then you get other ones like this, which are sort of general, more hippie, floaty. Jesus, I suppose, going up.

[5 : 32] But he's twice the size of everyone else there. We don't get that kind of detail in the Bible. You know, people are trying their best, I guess, to picture it and work out how it happened, what it looked like.

But all sorts of questions might arise when we do try and picture and think, well, what did actually happen? You know, how high did Jesus go before the clouds covered him from view?

How fast did he go? Was he waving as he went? You know, was he enjoying the view? Was it sort of arms in the air, Superman style or not? You know, the mind boggles a bit with the sort of mechanics, I suppose, of how this happened.

And yet, I guess more importantly, regardless of how it actually happened, the truth is that Jesus was clearly gone now. As Peter's face begins to clock, it seems, in this.

I like that expression there. He's like bewildered, but the significance obviously has hit him here. There are, in the Bible, no more post-resurrection eating and drinking in the flesh appearances of Jesus after this point.

[6 : 39] And interestingly, as far as we can tell, there was no rumor mill along the lines of, you know, my best friend's sister's boyfriend's brother's girlfriend heard from a guy who knows a kid who's going with a girl who bumped into Jesus last night.

There is no sense that Jesus makes these kind of random extra appearances or that people are chasing after Jesus. No, because the disciples, it seems, clearly believed. In fact, all his followers clearly believed that, in a physical sense, Jesus had now indeed gone.

And no one seems to go hunting for him. Which I think, in itself, gives added credibility to the way that Luke describes this episode as happening.

What's going on, though, with this whole ascension idea? I guess, of all places, why ascend from the Mount of Olives? What makes that place special?

Why is there a cloud that comes over? Why are we told that he's taken up to heaven? And as we know, heaven is not literally a place up there above the clouds and so on.

[7 : 48] Well, I guess if we take that last question first, in terms of being taken up into heaven, I guess it's really about Jesus allowing his disciples to realise, in their own way, that he's gone to a higher place, you know, above and beyond their understanding.

I mean, if you think about it, again, practically, if Jesus is going to go, he's got to leave in some direction, physically. And if he burrowed into the ground, that would be even weirder and sort of disappeared from sight that way.

Alternatively, if he just sort of went over a hill, they'd be chasing after him, wouldn't they? They'd sort of come back to Jesus and go, no, don't follow me, don't follow me. And that would kind of ruin his whole mission, wouldn't it, really? So he's got to go in some direction, obviously.

Going up, it seems, is the direction that's going to help his disciples understand that in a symbolic way, as much as anything, you know, he is above us in more ways than one.

Having ascended, though, I think we're also told that that cloud appears and it hides him from view. And again, there's symbolism to this as well, as it recalls the way in which God's holy presence is often described in the Old Testament in particular, such as you might remember the story of the cloud, which accompanies the ancient Israelites as God led them through the Exodus wilderness, or the cloud of God's glory, which is said to have filled the temple.

[9 : 20] So the cloud which covers Jesus, I guess it underlines that he's being taken into God's presence in the same way as God's presence was with the people here.

Taken up into heaven is the way Luke describes it, but we could call it, I guess, the holy dwelling place of God. And then why does all this happen on a Mount of Olives in particular?

Well, I think the geography probably gives us a clue on this. As the Mount of Olives seen here is a high ridge, just half a mile or so outside of Jerusalem.

So this is the view of the Mount of Olives, if you were looking from the city of Jerusalem. And then this is the view of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. And you might recognize the golden dome of the rock in the top of the middle there, which is in the same spot as the temple was in Jesus's day.

Indeed, in Jesus's day, the Mount of Olives, it seems, would have been perhaps the prime spot from which to enter the city of Jerusalem. For example, it's where Jesus, if we recall, paraded down from on Palm Sunday when he was being hailed by the crowds as king.

[10 : 37] And so we're back here again on the Mount of Olives where the disciples gather around the resurrected Jesus with the city of Jerusalem across from them.

And as they're gathered on the Mount of Olives with Jesus, with Jerusalem in view, it seems that kingship, as with Palm Sunday, is again on their mind. Because what do they ask him?

They say this, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? In other words, will life get back to normal now, Jesus?

Will life get good again, I suppose, now that you're fully back with us? Will you finally set things right? Will you kick the Romans out? Will we feel safe again now that you're with us?

And they're hoping for their question here, that yeah, he will restore the kingdom to Israel and make Israel great again, shall we say. They're hoping to say yes. Maybe they're fearing he'll say no.

[11 : 38] But instead, how does Jesus respond to this question? Well, his answer is not yes or no. It's far more intriguing than that.

He says this. He said, It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. It's like the future is on a need-to-know basis.

And you, says Jesus, Well, that's not something that you need to know. Which must have been a bit of a blow for the disciples, I think.

Because like most people, they'd have probably wanted to know the plan going ahead with God. You know, I guess in a big picture sense, I'm not sure we ever lose that desire to know what's coming up.

You know, when you're little kids, it's like on car journeys, are we there yet? Kind of thing. I don't think we ever lose that mentality. We want to know, not just on a car journey, but with God, you know, what God's got in store for us.

[12 : 38] We want to know that things will be all right. We want to know not just that God's got a plan, but ideally details. You know, what is that plan going to be?

It's almost, are we there yet, Jesus? You know, whatever there means. And yet Jesus says, It's not for you to know.

It's not for you to know. So why does he say this? Why does he deny them that detail? Well, I think as with everything, because we can trust Jesus, it seems that Jesus knows it's good for us not to know what the future holds.

For example, imagine if, as a 17-year-old, someone said to you, I know the future, and you are going to pass your driving test first time.

As a 17-year-old, what would you do? I know what I would have done. You'd probably think, you know, I don't need many lessons then, do I? I'm going to pass first time. I don't need to practice. I don't need to concentrate, because I'm going to pass first time.

[13 : 43] I've got this. Sussed. And yet, obviously, when the day of your test would come, you're going to fail with a dangerous probability as you sort of bunny hop down the road because you haven't put the time in because you were sure that you were going to pass first time.

Or say you're told the opposite. Say someone says to you, look, I know the future. There's no way you're ever going to pass your driving test. Well, I imagine you'd think, well, what's the point then?

What's the point in having any lessons? And again, if you were to take a test, you'd be almost guaranteed to fail. Seems either way, you know, regardless of whether we're told that the future is rosy or ropey, it's pretty much a guaranteed path to complacency.

But let's stay instead. We're told. It's not for you, actually, to know whether or not, in advance, you're going to pass your driving test.

But here's what is for you to know. Go out and practice. Take lessons. Watch other drivers. Train your eyes. Assess the risks and discover the joy of driving.

[14 : 55] Because not knowing the future, well, that will actually lead to a far better outcome than knowing the future would give you. And I think that's the same message that Jesus gives his disciples here in Acts chapter 1.

It's not for you to know the future. But here's what you do need to know in the present. He says this. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In other words, it's not what you know about the future that matters.

Rather, what matters is who you'll be in the present and how you'll be empowered to live in the best way possible. It's not for you to know the future.

But whatever the future brings, know that I, Jesus, will be with you through my spirit, giving you all the help you need to do what I'm calling you to do.

[16 : 01] And what is Jesus calling his disciples to do? Well, I guess, whereas the disciples seem only to be concerned about their own nation, this, Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel stuff?

Jesus says, come on, let's think bigger, let's think better than that. He tells them, you will be my witnesses. Your lives, if you like, will speak of the difference that my love makes.

Where are you going to be my witnesses? You'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, just down there, in all of Judea as well, though, in the surrounding towns and villages. You'll even be my witnesses in Samaria, which is that region full of people you don't like because they're different to you, but you're going to go and be my witnesses there.

But even more than that, you'll be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. You know, that's the future. That's the adventure that I've got for you. You know, not to restore the kingdom to Israel.

We might say not to make America great again, not to put Britain first or even be world-beating at anything as if that's something to aspire to.

[17 : 10] No, simply be my witnesses with whoever you meet, wherever you go. Share my good news, my love, my kindness, my peace, my hope, my joy.

And yet what's interesting, what Jesus doesn't say to these disciples is, and you know what, you're going to do that through being a fisherman, Peter, or a tax collector, Matthew, or a builder, or a teacher, or a receptionist, or a carer, or a homemaker.

No, that's not the kind of guidance it seems that Jesus gives here. And so I wonder sometimes for us, you know, especially during those times in life when we're trying to work out what to do, you know, when we're trying perhaps to find a new job or decide where to live or where to go to church or who to go out with or whatever, I suspect, just as Jesus does here, that God leaves the choices on those things much more up to us than we might realize.

I mean, if you think about it, just as any good parent is more concerned that their child lives a happy, fulfilled life than they are about the specifics of the career they have or whatever.

So I suspect God treats us in the same way, with the same encouraging, releasing, go and leave the nest kind of mentality. Yes, God might steer us towards things that could bring us fulfillment and happiness, but for Jesus here, seems it's not so much about what we do, but how we do it.

[18 : 54] Live in life in ways which bear witness to the difference that he makes in our lives. You will be my witnesses, says Jesus. You will be my representatives. And so that commissioning, that passing the baton on, I think that helps to make sense of what Jesus does next because, we're told, after he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.

In a sense, if Jesus does indeed want to commission his disciples and I'd say in turn us to be his representatives, then he needs to go.

He needs to let us get on with it, I guess. You see, if Jesus had stuck around in person in first century Judea, he could only have ever been in one place at one time and people would understandably have wanted to spend as much time with him probably to the detriment of them getting stuck into being Jesus' representatives in their everyday normal lives.

Instead, by ascending to heaven, Jesus has a better plan. A plan to enable his disciples to enable us to live a Jesus-focused, spirit-filled life, yeah, but to do that in our own place, in our own time, in our own way.

If Jesus goes, if Jesus ascends back to the Father, then through his spirit, that's what Jesus says. That's how I can be with all people, all of the time, in every place.

[20 : 36] It's a presence which is just not possible when he's here on earth, in the flesh. that's why I think the ascending Jesus is able to promise that through his spirit, he says, surely, even though I'm not with you in person, I am, through my spirit, with you always, to the very end of the age.

And so the brilliance, I think, of this plan of Jesus to go so that his spirit could come is that his presence is both ongoing and everywhere.

You know, the same spirit of Jesus, the same spirit which came at Pentecost and which Dave's going to unpack next week, that's the same spirit, that's the same power, the same presence who is with us and in us today.

And what does that feel like? Well, we'll be exploring that in the weeks to come, but for me, it might be things like that inner voice maybe prompting us to get in touch with someone who might need a bit of help.

That's the spirit of Jesus talking to us. Might be that sense of wonder when we look up and see the northern lights like many people did this week. Might be that sense of peace sitting out on a warm, sunny evening.

[21 : 53] That sense of encounter when we're moved by a worship song. That's the spirit of Jesus talking to us. might be the pain that we feel when we see children suffering in Gaza.

Could be the anger we feel when refugees are treated with such disdain. Could be the hope we feel when postal workers prevail against corrupt and callous executive.

Again, that's the spirit of Jesus talking to us, inviting us, and empowering us to think and speak and act with his thoughts, his words, and his actions.

And if we can get our heads around that privilege, that presence, that the God of the universe is the one who is here now, who lives in you and in me, well, that truth, the big God in our own little lives, that would revolutionize, I think, the way we see both ourselves and God.

The one final thought along these lines, because for Luke, in describing Jesus' departure in the way that he does with clouds and ascending up to heaven and so on, it seems that Luke knows his stuff about the Bible because it seems he's alluding to a passage in the Old Testament book of Daniel in which Daniel describes his vision of what the heavenly presence of God looked like.

[23 : 28] So Daniel says this, which Luke seems to be referring to. Daniel says, in my vision, I looked and there before me was one like a son of man.

Interestingly, the preferred title that Jesus often describes himself as. And this son of man is coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the ancient of days, an old name of describing God.

and was led into God's presence. He, this son of man, was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

These are powerful words and I think Daniel here gives us a glimpse of what Luke means when he tells us that Jesus was taken up to heaven.

[24 : 31] It's that kind of idea. It's not that Jesus has simply gone somewhere to hang about and put his feet up or whatever. No, rather, it's that Jesus has now taken his place in the heavenly realm as the one, as we're told, with all authority and glory and power.

That's an awesome picture, I'd say, of the reality of who Jesus really is. He's not any less human now, but now, through Daniel's vision, we see him in all his divine glory too.

And that means that the spirit who is with us here and now is the spirit of this same Jesus, this fully human yet fully divine, we might say grounded yet glorious, this cosmic companion who holds the whole world in his hands at the same time as caring for you and for me as a mother who cradles a child.

The writer and pastor Tim Keller, he puts it like this, he says, the ascension is not the absence of Christ, it's the increased and heightened presence of Christ.

And that increased and heightened presence is what's here. I'd say it's how God is here with us now through the Holy Spirit which is the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God.

[26 : 15] And my prayer is that we would be able to grasp afresh perhaps the wonder of that truth, of this life-shaping, life-enhancing, life-giving truth as we live for and as we worship the one who was and is and is to come.

So we're going to do that. It would be good if we can worship this God, this spirit, the spirit of Jesus, the one who is with us every moment of every day, the one who has all glory and authority and power and yet loves us and knows us intimately.

so the band are going to lead us in some songs to help us engage with this truth. If you're able, would you like to stand, please? And we'll sing our praises to God.

Do you something co-iphany Thank you.