

Luke 24:44-53 – The Ascension of Christ

Introduction

Thursday of this last week was Ascension Day. It may have passed unnoticed by many as we do not make much of this day in the UK – unlike other countries, such as France, where it is a public holiday.

When I was at Junior School – a very long time ago now – it was a Church-of-England school. We loved Ascension Day. We went to school as normal in the morning and a little later were taken off in a long procession to St Mary's, the local Anglican church, where we joined in the service for Ascension Day. We loved the day not because we had to attend a service in the historic church; we loved it because after the service the rest of the day was our own. We had an extra half-day holiday. We looked forward to Ascension Day, but I'm pretty sure we had very little idea of what it was all about. Nor did we care; we cared only that we were going to be set free for the afternoon.

So what is Ascension Day all about? It commemorates, of course, the day when, 40 days after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus ascended into heaven leaving his disciples open mouthed and alone. We understand why we celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection. We understand, I hope, why we celebrate Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out upon those fearful disciples. But why do we celebrate the ascension of Christ? What is its significance to the Christian faith? Perhaps it's because we have difficulty answering these questions that we no longer make much of this day.

This evening, I want to highlight something of the significance given by Scripture to Jesus' ascension, for our encouragement and learning.

1. The Ascension means Christ's atoning work is finished

At the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews, the author writes concerning the Lord Jesus, "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus, God's Son, came into this world to save sinners – to lay down his life as a ransom for many. After three intensive years of teaching, healing and training up his disciples, he was nailed to a cross and left to die. There, John tells us, just before he gave up his spirit, he cried out, "It is finished". It is a cry not of defeat, "I am finished / I am done for", but of triumph. He has finished the work the Father sent him into the world to do – "Love's redeeming work is done."

The resurrection is the demonstration that Christ's work is complete. He has conquered sin and death and has inaugurated the new creation.

After his resurrection, Jesus continued to appear to the disciples from time-to-time over forty days, teaching them about his kingdom.

At the end of this period, he ascended into heaven to sit at the Father's right hand. His work on earth was done. He had offered a full and final sacrifice for our sin. Nothing more need be done to cleanse us from our sins and reconcile us to God. "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."

It is this completed atoning work that we celebrate this evening as we meet to break bread together and drink wine: "the blood of Jesus... purifies us from all sin."

2. By his Ascension, Jesus has become our Great High Priest in the heavens

Let me refer you again to the letter to the Hebrews, which has so much to say about the exalted Christ. In Hebrews 6:20, the writer of the letter says that Jesus has entered into the presence of God in glory as "our forerunner" and "on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." In this he/she is quoting Psalm 110 which speaks of David's Lord, enthroned at God's right hand, as being, "a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4).

Jesus no longer has to atone for our sin – that work is done. But he has entered heaven on our behalf. Just like the High Priests of old entered the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement having made a sacrifice for the sin of the people, so Jesus has entered heaven for us. There, as our Great High Priest, he intercedes for us, pleading the merits of his own shed blood. He remains our mediator, who brings us ever and afresh into the presence of God. As the author of Hebrews says:

Because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7:24-25)

He has entered into the presence of God on our behalf. He has gone to prepare a place for us. Because he continues to intercede for us he will save us completely – we too shall be brought safe to glory! What a precious thought.

3 The Ascension marks the Coronation of Christ

Thus far we have focussed on what the ascension of the Lord Jesus means for us personally or individually. But Jesus did not come into the world just to make things right for me. His redeeming purposes are much bigger than that.

In Psalm 110, King David speaks prophetically of a far greater king to come, one whom he will address as Lord. David writes:

The Lord says to my lord:
'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.' (Psalm 110:1)

And Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost, quotes this Psalm and draws the conclusion:

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. (Acts 2:36)

Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand is his enthronement, his coronation. It is the demonstration that God has owned "this Jesus", the crucified carpenter of Nazareth, as Messiah – his anointed King – and as Lord over all creation.

And he must reign until all his enemies come to bow at his feet. Again, in the words of the author of Hebrews:

When this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. (Hebrews 10:12)

Or in the words of the Apostle Paul, because Christ died for us on the cross:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Not only is God waiting and working for every human being to recognise that Jesus Christ is Lord, his purpose is to bring "all things in heaven and earth" into united submission to Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Then, and only then, will all creation be restored to its created purpose and glory.

Jesus' Ascension marks his coronation, the beginning of his reign and the promise of the day when all things shall be made new. We can have the highest hopes for the reign of this king!

4. The ascension was essential to the outpouring of the Spirit

Jesus told his disciples that they should be glad that he is going back to the Father (John 14:28), for he would then, "ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with

you for ever – the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-17). So Peter told the crowds on the Day of Pentecost concerning Jesus, "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" (Acts 2:33).

The ascension of the Lord Jesus was essential to the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Or to put it another way round, the outpouring of the Spirit was proof that Jesus was enthroned at God's right hand, and was to be the means by which people of every nation and language would be drawn to recognise that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Or to put it yet another way, the ascension gives us a job to do. In the opening chapter of the Book of Acts we read of Jesus appearing to his disciples over a period of forty days and speaking to them about the kingdom of God. They really did not yet understand what he was saying to them and asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus does not give them a direct answer but tells them to go back to Jerusalem and await the coming of the Spirit saying, "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" (Acts 1:8). Jesus then ascended into heaven before their astonished eyes. Two angels then appeared to the disciples and asked them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? 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" (Acts 1:11). In other words, they are told to get ready for the task that Jesus has for them to do.

And we are the heirs of that task. Jesus' ascension is his coronation as Lord and King over all the earth. He must reign until every knee bows to him. The Spirit has been poured out to this end, so that people of all nations will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. And we have a vital role in this task. The ascended king has appointed us as his ambassadors, equipped with his authority and power, to call the world to recognise its rightful Lord. The ascension means that the Lord Jesus has left us with a job to do for him – to work and pray that his kingdom may come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

5. The Ascension is the guarantee that Jesus will come again

And finally, picking up again on the words of the two angels to the open-mouthed disciples, "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." Jesus' ascension bears the promise of his return.

Jesus rose bodily from the dead as the firstfruits of the new creation. When he returns bodily from heaven it will be to transform the whole of creation. Our bodies shall be transformed to be like his glorious resurrection body. And the whole of creation will be released from its "bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

The ascension of Jesus means that there is already a little bit of earth in the presence of God in heaven. It is the promise and guarantee that one day, at his return, all creation will be filled with the presence and the glory God – "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

The ascension of Christ should prompt us to worship him, encourage us to serve him in the work of the kingdom and fill us with hope for the day of his coming.

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