

St Mary's Tadley

Ascension Day 21 May 2020



Collect

Risen Christ,

you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven:

help us to seek and serve you,

that we may join you at the Father's side,

where you reign with the Spirit in glory,

now and for ever.

Amen.

The Liturgy of Ascension Day

The Gathering

God has gone up with a shout,
All the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

Psalm 47.5

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
All Amen.

The Greeting

Grace, mercy and peace
from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ
be with you
All and also with you.

Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for forty days we have been celebrating with joyful hearts the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, his bursting from the tomb and his defeat of the power of sin and death. He appeared to his disciples many times and told them about the kingdom of God. Today we recall how he left this earth and returned to his Father, ascending into heaven to take his throne over all dominions and powers. Trusting in his reign over all creation, and submitting to his kingly yet loving rule, let us hear the story of his parting.

The Ascension Reading

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles (1.4-11)

While staying with them, Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy

Spirit not many days from now.’ So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

All He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

The Collect

Let us pray that our risen and ascended Lord will lead us to eternal life.

Silence is kept.

Risen Christ,
you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven:
help us to seek and serve you,
that we may join you at the Father’s side,
where you reign with the Spirit in glory,
now and for ever.

All Amen.

The Liturgy of the Word

Reading

A reading from the Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (1.15-end)

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power

to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is the word of the Lord.

All Thanks be to God.

Canticle

**All All nations shall come and worship you, O Christ,
and share in the feast of your kingdom.**

- 1 Great and wonderful are your deeds, ◆
Lord God the Almighty.
- 2 Just and true are your ways, ◆
O ruler of the nations.
- 3 Who shall not revere and praise your name, O Lord? ◆
for you alone are holy.
- 4 All nations shall come and worship in your presence: ◆
for your just dealings have been revealed.

Revelation 15.3,4

**All To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

**All All nations shall come and worship you, O Christ,
and share in the feast of your kingdom.**

Gospel Reading

Alleluia, alleluia.

Go and make disciples of all nations, says the Lord.

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

cf Matthew 28.19,20

All Alleluia.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

All Glory to you, O Lord.

Luke 24.44-end

Then he 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, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been 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 was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

All Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon – Rev Robert Young

Ascension Day 2020

The rain had stopped, in amongst the white cumulus clouds there was enough blue to make a sailor a pair of trousers (as my Grandma used to say) and peering over the clouds was God with a Father Christmas type white beard and a slightly stern but concerning face looking down on me – at least that's what my childhood memory recalls as one Sunday afternoon I ran out into our small suburban garden.

And the Ascension day story feeds rather nicely into this scenario; Jesus floating upwards back to his Father behind the clouds, to sit on a throne at his right hand, peering down at us occasionally, ready to intervene to stop us totally destroying our nest, as ant-like, we scurry around in our apparently busy lives, Now as with many of the other miraculous events described by the writers of the Bible, I have no particular problem with things actually happening as the writers describe. If the God who created this incredibly complex world wants to do something in a particular way then I see no reason why it shouldn't have happened that way, though we need always to bear in mind that God is not a celebrity entertainer showing off his tricks, everything he does and did and will

do is for a purpose even if quite often we can't seem to see it. We also frequently get confused with what we think he "does" and what so often we "do" to ourselves, and he has to wade in and help us out.

I believe the Bible contains the word of God. It has a purpose. It speaks to generation after generation with various parts seemingly speaking louder at various times, and some parts making little or no sense to others when not experiencing life like that, and I know I have sometimes found it all too easy to mould the stories into what I want them to say at a particular time, or occasionally I feel embarrassed about some story or dreadful verses in a psalm which we avoid reading on Sundays.

So we need to look at these stories not just as, sometimes, marvellous fact, but at what they say to us and lead to. I suggest the account of Christ's Ascension is very much one of those.

You could think it is a literary device used by Luke to explain what happened to Jesus after the resurrection, when really Jesus, after passing on the baton to his disciples, went off to live the rest of his life quietly in a little village at the back end of the Roman Empire. There are many problems with this, not the least being would the disciples give up their lives for something they knew was not true? Other problems with that scenario include the fact that he already lived in a little village at the back end of the Roman Empire and that didn't stop the stories about him causing more than ripples in Jerusalem, whilst for me it's even harder to imagine his followers let alone his enemies allowing him to live like that, even in the days before the paparazzi, nor Jesus settling for that as life in Israel deteriorates leading to the destruction of the temple (in what might have been his old age?).

No, somehow Jesus returned to his Father and the real question we need to ask ourselves is what does this all mean?

Let's have a look at what the Gospel writers actually say.

John's story of Jesus kind of peters out after Jesus reinstatement of Peter and says nothing about what happened next to Jesus, though earlier Jesus does say he will be sending the Holy Spirit after he goes.

Matthew ends with Jesus meeting the disciples on a mountain and giving them "the great commission" to go and make disciples, but doesn't specifically refer to the Ascension.

Mark's story ends with the resurrection although there are those curious additional verses which our Bible includes but imply by the notes may be unreliable. These verses also contain a commission, "Go into the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:14) and ends with "After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat on the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19)

Luke in his gospel also tells of Jesus commissioning the disciples to be his witnesses and goes on to say "When he (Jesus) had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). And in Acts "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). Luke also in both the gospel and Acts talks about the disciples being told by Jesus to wait for the Holy Spirit to come to empower them for the task of witness when he leaves them.

That's all we know about the Ascension in spite of what it may say in hymns, poems, creeds, and pictures. And can I say in spite of spending all this time talking about it I'm not sure we need to know any more than that. What we need to understand is what that means.

First we are told in John 16:7 "Unless I go away the Advocate (Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go I will send him" which is corroborated by Luke Acts 1 "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift (the Holy Spirit) my Father promised. As I have often heard it said, "when Jesus was on earth in human form he was only in one place at a time but the Spirit can be everywhere".

Second "Commission" is a major message in Jesus leaving, "I've done what I came to do, now get on with it"! As long as he was physically with them, they could take a back seat. He needed to go, just as most children need to leave their family home if they are to flourish. I particularly like the instructions in Mark 16:15 "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation".

Third the simple gospel message preached throughout Jesus' ministry was "Repent the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). So the disciples ask in Acts 1 just before Jesus ascends "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

And I think that's where we really are today: Commissioned by Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit and restoring (perhaps revealing is a clearer word) God's Kingdom, for God has always been ultimately ruling but often humankind has neither listened nor obeyed.

And now we return to the question where did Jesus go? Personally I think the answer is he didn't "go" anywhere because the heaven he went to isn't up behind my cumulus clouds – that's something we do now know as fact – it is breaking through here and now. It is in the words and acts of kindness and love abounding at this time; it is reflected in the beauty of creation; it is just the other side of the veil of death. God's Kingdom is continually breaking through (theologically called inaugurated eschatologyⁱ) and we are promised one day God's kingdom will all come together, as we read in Revelation 21 "God's dwelling place (will) be among the people"; coming to us not going to him, and there will be "a new heaven and a new earth".

So by all means let's enjoy the imagery of the Ascension; let's be grateful for the Holy Spirit, but let's not forget our commission, and let's look forward to the fulfilment of God's Kingdom even in our present distress.

Remember the two men (angels) in white after Jesus Ascended asked "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back". (Acts 1:11).

Prayers of Intercession

Let us join our prayers with those of our Saviour Christ, seeking the Father's blessing and the gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus Christ, great high priest,
living for ever to intercede for us,
pray for the Church, your broken body in the world ...
Lord, hear us.

All Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, king of righteousness,
enthroned at the right hand of the majesty on high,
pray for the world, and make it subject to your gentle rule ...
Lord, hear us.

All Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, Son of Man,
drawing humanity into the life of God,
pray for your brothers and sisters in need, distress or sorrow ...

Lord, hear us.

All Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, pioneer of our salvation,
bringing us to glory through your death and resurrection,
surround with your saints and angels
those who have died trusting your promises ...

Lord, hear us.

All Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ, Lord over all things,
ascended far above the heavens and filling the universe,
pray for us who receive the gifts you give us for work in your service ...

Lord, hear us.

All Lord, graciously hear us.

Jesus Christ,
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit
and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at your feet;
for you are alive and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

All Amen.

Merciful Father,

**All accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

The Peace

Jesus says: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.
If you love me, rejoice because I am going to the Father'. Alleluia.

John 14.27,28

The peace of the Lord be always with you

All and also with you.

Let us offer one another a sign of peace.

All may exchange a sign of peace.

The Dismissal

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you
may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Go in the peace of Christ, Alleluia, alleluia.

All Thanks be to God. Alleluia, alleluia.

ⁱ **Inaugurated eschatology** is the belief in Christian theology that the end times were **inaugurated** in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and thus there are both "already" and "not yet" aspects to the Kingdom of God.

Thank you for participating in our service today. If you would like to share in creating our worship services, please let Rev Gill know and if you have any questions, comments, or would like to get in contact with Rev Gill for any reason, please phone the Vicarage on 01189 279 321.

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