

Sermon: The significance of the Ascension

(PP Art Slide – Dinah Roe Kendall)

I wonder what you think about the Ascension of Jesus?

Perhaps you've never given it much thought – I'm not sure many Christians have.

Do we have problem with the Ascension?

A neglected doctrine / Slips off the radar.

Do you know when Ascension Day is? (Thursday 14th May)

Ascension is a bit odd!

- 1) Was it a good strategy for Jesus to leave? Substituting your star player?
- 2) Is there also a sense of embarrassment about it? - Jesus taking off to heaven – zooming into the sky – “Jesus the Spaceman!”

When Yuri Gagarin returned from space in 1961 he is reported to have said that he didn't see heaven up there!

In a scientific age, like ours, we no longer literally think heaven is up there and hell is below our feet. So can we make sense of the Ascension?

Yet I want to argue that the Ascension is a vital part of the Gospel for us and is highly relevant to our lives as followers of Jesus.

Firstly lets consider, Where did Jesus go at the Ascension?

The Simple Answer - He went to Heaven – into the presence of Father God.

This wasn't a journey in distance – like going from Markyate to Hemel Hempsted. Heaven is not a galaxy far far away – not a place in our universe of time and space. Heaven is a different dimension of reality – a layer of reality beyond our senses – a 4th dimension if you will.

Theologian Tom Wright describes Heaven and Earth as twin halves of God's goo creation that interlock and overlap. A dimension which can intersect with earth, if it is revealed, if the curtain is pulled back

We see examples of this in the Bible:

Jacob / Elisha / Transfiguration of Jesus / "Thin places".

But if it is better not to think of heaven being up in the sky why did Jesus go up in the Ascension?

Endings need to be marked. Think of the ceremony at the end of a degree course or the funeral at the end of a life.

Jesus had already told his disciples he would be leaving them – "I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer" John 16 v10.

The Ascension was the event to mark the end of Jesus' earthly ministry / the end of his resurrection appearances.

Jesus didn't just disappear or fade away. His departure was a public event, witnessed by his followers, "he was taken up before their very eyes" Acts 1 v9. It was a bodily ascension – his resurrection body was really present and it really left.

So why did Jesus go up? I think it a kind of "visual aid" for the disciples. To put it in a modern way it gave them "closure". God has

to communicate in ways humans understand – perhaps this best fitted their understanding.

So the ascension clearly affirms that Jesus’ body left the earth and went to the very presence of God, Heaven.

His return to heaven was an **important ending** but also marked a **glorious new beginning**, ushering in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church.

We can see this through how Luke positions the “Ascension” account. It both **closes** the Gospel of Luke at the **end** of Jesus’ earthly ministry but the “Ascension” also **opens** the book of Acts. The story of the Early Church and the “Outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”

What happened at the Ascension?

Simple answer - Jesus was exalted and enthroned King!

(God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name which is above every name!)

The Ascension was Jesus’ joyful homecoming! His hero’s welcome! Think of a victory procession!

I live in Caddington and I see lots of planes fly overhead / but the perspective is completely different if you’re sat on a plane looking down.

Same with the Ascension - there is a view from below and a view from above. Luke gives us the view from below – the disciples’ perspective but where do we find the View from above?

The surprising answer is in the OT – a medley of Psalms picture the scene of a victorious King returning in triumph – they anticipate the ascension.

Psalm 24 v7-8

“Lift up your heads O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors that the King of Glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Psalm 47 v5

“God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.”

Most amazingly, we read this in the book of Daniel (7 v13-14)

“In my vision I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power, all peoples, nations and men 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.”

What an intriguing picture of the Ascension.

Jesus was vindicated and glorified – crowned King – the top spot is taken! Jesus is at the Father’s Right Hand – the place of executive power.

In Michael Lloyd’s phrase, “The governance of the universe is in the utterly safe and scarred hands of Jesus.”

This is heady stuff! Jesus is King of the universe but how does it translate into our lives?

What does the Ascension means for us?

We know in this world, at this time, Jesus' Kingship is disputed but He is enthroned - it is the beginning of the end – God's Kingdom **IS** triumphant – we are living in the end times - Jesus is coming back bodily and in victory! – (Acts 1 v11)

Specifically, The Ascension gives us a job to do!

The challenge for us corporately – is to ensure that our church is the place in this neighbourhood where Christ's reign can be seen and experienced. That should impact on all aspects of our life together – how we worship, pray and serve others of course but also everything else, how we make decisions, or resolve disagreements, how we engage in politics or care for our world.

The great news is that we aren't left relying on our own resources – but we are commissioned by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Remember Jesus said,

“It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you”.
John 16 v7.

Of course, Jesus' promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost; notice how in Peter's sermon on that Day he links Pentecost with Ascension.

Acts 2 v32-33 – “God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact. 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.”

Jesus' exaltation in Heaven is proved to Peter by the gift of the Holy Spirit – given at Pentecost - a gift open to us today.

With Jesus no longer physically with us, God's primary means of working in his world is now through us. We are witnesses to God's Kingdom, to announce Jesus' sovereign rule.

To that task He commissions us (all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples of all nations)

We are commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the reign of Jesus to this world - Jesus is our ascended King.

Let's reclaim The Ascension! It is a vital component of the Gospel message.

In Closing – and in approaching Communion

I want to Highlight another aspect of the Ascension.

Jesus ascended to become our "Great High Priest".

Jesus, a fully human being, becomes our eternal and perfect priest representing us before God in Heaven.

In a lovely phrase from John Duncan, "The dust of the earth sits on the throne of heaven". Jesus is "our man in Heaven" / interceding for us.

In Old Testament times, the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, passed from the sight of the people into the Most Holy Place. Likewise, Jesus passed from the sight of the disciples, ascending through the heavens into the heavenly sanctuary, his work of atonement accomplished.

Jesus is the greater reality to which the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament points, a theme wonderfully developed by the book of Hebrews.

We can be assured of our salvation because Jesus ascended to the presence of God.

We are going to sing a hymn which develops this great truth – “Before the throne of God above” – I encourage you to use this to focus your minds before communion today.

But I’ll finish with some of the most encouraging words in scripture, taken from the end of Hebrews chapter 4

“Therefore since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us the approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Amen