

## ACTS 1.9-11: THE ASCENSION

*[Sermon preached in Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge, 24 May 2005]*

*“If Easter Sunday was the most exciting day of the disciples’ lives, for Jesus it was probably the day of Ascension. He the Creator, who had descended so far and given up so much, was now heading home”. So wrote award-winning American author Philip Yancey in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*.*

Martyn Day described the contrast a little differently. Drawing upon the terminology of the Olympic Games, he wrote: *“If [Jesus’] resurrection was his actual crossing of the line to win the gold medal, the ascension was the presentation ceremony for that medal with a heavenly anthem heralding his triumph”*

On this Sunday after ascension I want to focus on the meaning of the ascension. But even as I begin my sermon, I am conscious that some of you may be asking yourselves, *‘Can we really believe this kind of thing today? No doubt those who lived before Copernicus could believe that Jesus went up vertically and sat down a few miles above the visible sky. But we live in 21<sup>st</sup> century – we can no longer believe in a three-decker universe: heaven above, hell below and earth in-between’*. Furthermore, as one Canadian internet critic noted in a somewhat unimaginative fashion, a person ascending a few miles into the air would die from lack of oxygen.

Certainly, those Christians who present Jesus as the first astronaut are misguided. Mount Olivet was no Cape Kennedy.

But this is no reason to dismiss the Ascension as a pleasant myth.

What we have here is a so-called *‘acted parable’*: Jesus through the act of his Ascension demonstrates to his disciples that he is going to the Father.

How precisely that was achieved, I don’t know.

But then we don’t have to understand everything, in order to believe.

I don’t know how God became man. All I know is that the Word became flesh.

A pointer to the reality of the event is the restrained matter-of-fact manner in which Luke records the incident. Luke doesn’t try to explain how Jesus had lift-off. He simply states: **“He was taken up into heaven as they watched him and a cloud hid him from their sight”** (Acts 1.9)

But at the end of the day the ‘how’ is not important.

What matters is not the manner of Jesus’ going, but the *meaning* of his going.

This is my focus this evening. What does the Ascension mean?

## 1. THE ASCENSION MARKS THE END OF A CHAPTER

The Ascension marks the end of a chapter, in the sense that it marks the end of Jesus' resurrection appearances.

Luke tells us at the beginning of Acts, "**For 40 days after his death he [Jesus] appeared to them many times in ways that proved beyond doubt that he was alive. They saw him and he talked with them about the Kingdom of God**" (Acts 1.3). For 40 wonderfully exhilarating days Jesus kept on appearing to those who loved him. But those days couldn't go on. The Spirit had to be given – the age of the church had to begin.

Yet Jesus could not just fade out.

A decisive and deliberate withdrawal was called for – something which was quite different in character from his 'disappearance' from the two on the Emmaus Road. This is the context in which the Ascension took place. The Ascension was a necessity in the sense that there had to be '*an acted declaration of finality*'.

Hence the importance of the "**cloud**", which "**hid him from their sight**" (1.9).

The **cloud** marked the end of a chapter in the life of Jesus.

As Jesus had arrived in this world at a particular moment of time – so too he had to leave at a particular moment of time.

Otherwise his disciples would have just hung around waiting for further appearances, rather than getting on with the job of living for Christ.

But the Ascension was far more than a deliberate act of withdrawal.

The Ascension marked the return of Jesus to heaven, to the place where God is.

It is the counterpart of the Incarnation.

The Lord of glory, who had left his Father, now returns to his Father.

This return to his Father was symbolised by the **cloud**, which "**hid him from their sight**" (Acts 1.9).

The cloud symbolised not just separation, but also God's presence.

Think back to the Old Testament: the cloud that overhung the tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex 40.34), that filled Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8.10), was the cloud of the divine glory, the so-called 'Shekinah', symbolizing the presence of God.

Jesus did not just leave his disciples, he was caught up into God's presence – just as had happened on the Mount of Transfiguration. But, Luke tells us, that unlike that earlier occasion Jesus did not return, for he "**was taken... into heaven**" (v11).

Notice how significant that phrase was for Luke: "**into heaven**" is repeated four times in just two verses. Jesus entered into his Father's presence. He returned home!

Why did Jesus return home?

Because the work he had come to do in the world was completed.

The Ascension marks the end of a chapter, because Jesus had accomplished his mission.

So the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews states: "**After achieving forgiveness for human sins, he sat down in heaven at the right-hand side of God**" (1.3).

The Ascension marks the completion of our salvation – it points to the fact that Jesus has done all that was necessary for our sins to be forgiven.

In the words of John Calvin: "*Since Christ is entered into heaven in our name, so the gate is now open to us which was formerly closed on account of our sin*"

It is this truth to which the Ascension points.

## 2. THE ASCENSION MARKS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CHAPTER

The Ascension marks also the beginning of a new chapter.

For the risen ascended Lord Jesus is now seated at his Father's right hand.

So in the very next chapter of Acts we hear Peter on the Day of Pentecost declaring:

**“God raised this very Jesus from death...to the right-hand side of God the Father”**

(Acts 2.23,33).

This phrase **“at the right hand of God”** occurs time and again in the New Testament – 20 times to be precise. It brings out the theological significance of the ascension.

It spells out the implications of the new chapter.

The phrase itself was taken from Ps 110, the most widely quoted Psalm in the New Testament, and a Psalm quoted by Jesus himself: **“The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit here at my right (hand) until I put your enemies under your feet’”** (Ps 110.1)

This psalm was sung at the coronation of Israel's kings. According to Jewish thought the king possessed divine authority; he was God's representative.

To speak of the king seated at God's right hand was another way of saying that he was exercising power delegated to him by God himself.

Later the rabbis applied this psalm to the coming Messiah. Not surprisingly, it was taken up in the early church and applied to the ascended Lord Jesus.

The Ascended Jesus is the one to whom all power and authority have been given!

In other words, the Ascension declares that Jesus is Lord.

The Ascension in effect marks the coronation of Jesus as king of the universe

The Ascension has nothing to do with meteorology, but everything to do with politics.

Jesus is Lord 'over all' not in spatial terms, but in power terms.

The right hand of God is a place of authority.

In the words of the Christ hymn of Phil 2: **“God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name, And so in honour of the name of Jesus... all will fall on their knees and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord”** (2.9-11)

Yes, Jesus is at the Father's right hand – he rules over *“all demonic forces, all political forces, all economic forces, all sociological forces, all natural forces”* (David Holloway). To quote from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Eph 1.20-23: **“God set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule”**.

In other words, it won't be Gordon Brown or David Cameron, let alone Barack Obama, having the last word, but Jesus. Jesus is indeed Lord!

### 3. THE ASCENSION ANTICIPATES A FINAL CHAPTER

Finally, the ascension anticipates a final chapter.

To the bemused disciples the two angels declared, **“This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go into heaven”**(Acts 1.11)

Here we have the promise of Jesus return.

One day Jesus shall return to wind up all human history.

One day right and not just might will out.

One day not just the secrets of our MPs will be revealed, but also the secrets of us all.

Or in the words of the Creed: *“and he will come to judge the living and the dead”*.

Sadly, this basis tenet of Christian believing has been distorted by some over-enthusiastic Christians, who have developed all kinds of weird and wonderful predictions about the return of Jesus.

Frankly, the manner and the timing of Jesus’ return are unknown.

Nor should they be of particular interest to us.

In this respect I find it significant that the angels reprove the disciples for dawdling there and for longing for Jesus to remain with them: **“Galileans, why are you standing there looking up at the sky?”** (Acts 1.11). I.e. stop looking up to heaven – rather fix your eyes rather on earth – for there is work to be done.

Indeed, according to Luke that was precisely the thrust of Jesus’ final words to his disciple: **“The times and occasions are set by my Father’s own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be. BUT when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”** (Acts 1.7,8).

The mission of Jesus may have ended with the ascension – but for us, the ascension marks the beginning of our mission. We have a world to win and a world to serve. There is no place for gazing into the heavens – the world is to be our focus.

**“Then the apostles went back to Jerusalem”** (1.12), records Luke.

You might have thought that they would have returned somewhat shell-shocked.

For most people the loss of a loved one is pretty traumatising – and even more so when it takes place in such unusual circumstances.

However, when Luke records the same event at the end of his Gospel he writes: **“They went back into Jerusalem, filled with great joy”** (Lk 24.49). Instead of mourning their loss, they rejoiced in Jesus, the risen, ascended, reigning Lord.

On this Sunday after Ascension, as we in turn focus on the ascended Lord, may that same joy fill our hearts and minds.