

Readings Luke 24: 44-53, Hebrews 4:14-16 16 May 2021

Intro

This Sunday we are looking at the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Ascension is celebrated forty days after Easter as we read in Acts that after Jesus' suffering "He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3b). This is why Ascension is on a Thursday, and not a Sunday. However, we now celebrate it on a Sunday as Ascension Thursday is not a bank holiday, like in many other European countries.

We do not know much from the Bible about the event of Jesus' Ascension, as it is only related to us at the end of Luke (today's passage) and at then beginning of Acts (1:1-17), and then very briefly:

Luke 14:50-52: ⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Acts 1:9-10: ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘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.’

I think this highlights that the method of the Ascension is not important, but that the Ascension itself is significant.

At our Cafe Church last week Sue Marsh took us through the four different reasons why Jesus had to ascend:

- 1) To rule and reign – as he is King he could not stay in one place on earth. In heaven in the Throne Room of God he is able to rule and reign over the whole universe.
- 2) To release the Holy Spirit
- 3) To represent us to the Father
- 4) and finally he will return!

Today I want to look at two aspects: That Jesus released to us the Holy Spirit and that he represent us to the Father.

To release the Holy Spirit.

Without Ascension, Pentecost would not have happened. At Pentecost, next week, we celebrate the birth of the Church, through the outpouring of power of the Holy Spirit on its members.

But the Church is not a nice Social Club, it is Global Enterprise as J John relates to us. With outlets throughout the world, providing services to make behavioural changes in peoples lives and to bring people into a relationship with God. Yes, this God's global enterprise. And the CEO is Jesus Christ. But do you think that this Global Enterprise would have survived the first year after Jesus's resurrection, if not through the power of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus himself, even after the resurrection appears to the disciples as a human man, with the characteristics of a human: eating and being wounded. As a human he cannot be at more than in one place at the time. Instead he ascended to Heaven and the Holy Spirit came to represent him to us. But the Holy Spirit also gives us the supernatural power needed to ensure that the

global enterprise is alive, growing and building the Kingdom of God.

Therefore :

1. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, so that we repent and follow Jesus and are born into the Kingdom of God.

2. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us: Jer 31:31-34 quoted again in Hebrew 8: 8-12 says:

“This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel

after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws in their minds

and write them on their hearts.

I will be their God,

and they will be my people.” (Heb 8:10)

It is the Holy Spirit who lives in our hearts and minds and changes us from within so that we become like Jesus and live according to God’s laws. This is called sanctification.

3. But then the Holy Spirit also empowers us to be witnesses. And this is what Jesus refers to in the Luke passage:

⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ (Luke 24:48-49)

and in Acts 1:8

⁸ 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.’ (Acts 1:8).

as well as in John 14:12:

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do **even greater things** than these, because I am going to the Father.”

4. And finally the Holy Spirit brings Koinonia or Fellowship. It is binding this motley crew that really does not have anything else in common with each other than their faith in Jesus, to become a dedicated organisation to do God will on Earth.

It is only through those four works of the Holy Spirit that we can become Christian and work together as the Body of Christ: the Church, in order to be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ: “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus represent us to the Father

The second reason for the ascension I want to look at is that Jesus now represents us to the Father.

As King, Jesus rules from heaven and has directed the Holy Spirit to direct his church and empower it to be powerful witness, but Jesus also has another role. He is the ultimate Priest. Well, a Priest in the Jewish nation represented the people to God through sacrifices:

“In the law of Moses, [a] sacrificial system was highly developed and provided the means of the atonement of sin, as well as, offering praise and thanksgiving to God. The priest presided over the whole system.”

And by dying on the Cross, Jesus has fulfilled both types of sacrifice (Atonement and Praise & Thanksgiving) once and for all, so that no more sacrifices are needed.

Furthermore Jesus also

1. Forgives sins and brings reconciliation between God and humankind
2. Heals and makes whole those who are broken
3. Jesus intercedes for us to the Father.

Of the latter Paul says in Romans:

“³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. “

After his ascension Jesus is seated next to the Father and he forgives and heals us, as well represents and defends us to the Father. To make intercession on someone behalf is to defend them and plead for them.

And this where our passage of Hebrews 4 comes in. The high priest, ascended into Heaven, can feel sympathy with what we have to live through and also knows our temptations. And even though he did not give in to temptation and did not sin, it is out of his experience that he represents us to God the Father.

It because of this, the passage continues, that we are ourselves invited into God’s presence into Heaven and that we can approach God’s throne with confidence, as we are assured that we will find grace and mercy in our times of need.

And that means also that when we pray we can be assured of not only grace and mercy but also full understanding. It means that we can release any guilt,

shame or embarrassment for what we have done wrong, as Jesus understands the circumstances in which we did them and forgives and loves us. Praise God!

Application.

So let us prepare ourselves for Pentecost next week, and ready ourselves to receive or re-receive the Holy Spirit who saves us, sanctifies us, empowers us and binds us together.

And in preparation know that we have a High Priest in Heaven who wants to forgive us, heal us, make us whole and who intercedes for us. So we approach the throne of Grace where God is, without reluctance, but with faith that we will be received with grace, mercy and love, and ask him for forgiveness and healing so that we may become whole, and empowered through the Holy Spirit to be Jesus' witnesses in the world.

To the Glory of God the Father!

Amen.