

Worship • 16th May 2021

Christchurch, Hitchin (CCLI 7011)

Ascension Sunday

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFCafHrd338>



WELCOME

We're so glad you could join us at Christchurch, Hitchin, and hope you will be blessed by our time together. Leading our worship this morning:

Reflections: Katherine Harris
Music: Michael Crowley, Katriona Bevan, *vocalist:* Lisa Morgan
Reading & Drama: Tony Edmonds
Technology: John Hamblin

This morning we will be celebrating Jesus' ascension – the time after His resurrection when He was raised to heaven and took His place at the right hand of Almighty God. Jesus, once limited in time and space to first century Palestine, becomes free to be everywhere and for all time, just as He promised. Jesus is with us here and now – in our worship, in our relationships, in our lives.

So let us praise and honour our Lord Jesus as we gather in His name.

HYMN

Jesus is the name we honour (*Singing the Faith 354 • Songs of Fellowship 870*)

- 1 Jesus is the name we honour;
Jesus is the name we praise.
Majestic Name above all other names,
the highest heaven and earth proclaim
that Jesus is our God.

*We will glorify,
we will lift Him high,
we will give Him honour and praise.
We will glorify,
we will lift Him high,
we will give Him honour and praise.*
- 2 Jesus is the name we worship;
Jesus is the name we trust.
He is the King above all other kings,
let all creation stand and sing
that Jesus is our God.
- 3 Jesus is the Father's splendour;
Jesus is the Father's joy.
He will return to reign in majesty,
and every eye at last shall see
that Jesus is our God.

SETTING THE SCENE

Ascension

Jesus' ascension occurred 40 days after His resurrection and is a key event in the story of salvation. It is included in the early Christian statements of faith – in both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.

But celebrating the Ascension as an important Christian holiday is often forgotten or ignored. Why?

Maybe because the Ascension took place on a Thursday, and the Church tends to meet on Sunday.

Or maybe it gets overshadowed by Pentecost which follows 10 days later.

Or maybe it's because we just don't really understand its significance.

Certainly Luke, the gospel writer and a companion of Paul the apostle, clearly found the Ascension a pivotal event. So much so, that he wrote about it twice. First, at the very end of his gospel, a well-researched and detailed account of Jesus' life. The second time was at the very beginning of Acts, the story of the beginning of the Church and the early growth of Christianity.

The Ascension serves as a hinge, the pivot point connecting both of these books. The Ascension is the story which links the life of Jesus to the life of the Church.

So, now on to the account of Jesus' ascension in the book of Acts.

Try to immerse yourself in the scene.

Picture what is happening.

What do you notice?

What do you hear Jesus saying?

What seems particularly important?

BIBLE TEXT

Acts 1:1-14 (NRSV)

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he 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 baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

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 toward 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.'

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

REFLECTION

Jesus ascends

Just a moment to reflect on this reading. If you are watching this live as we stream the service on YouTube, feel free to add a comment. Otherwise, take just a moment to reflect on this reading.

:

How can we adequately put into words something that radically changes both heaven and earth? Painting a picture on canvas can be more challenging.

Have you ever seen a picture, stained glass window or a roof boss in a church depicting Jesus' ascension? I think my favourite is in the York Minster. As you look up, you see the soles of Jesus' feet sticking out of a cloud, and the faces of the Apostles looking up in utter bewilderment and confusion. It does make me giggle inside – it all seems a bit ridiculous, comical even.

But the Ascension is anything but ridiculous.

It's just that our language can't fully convey the enormity of the event.

And I won't be able to explain it all either. But I can give us a few things to think about - a few pointers, if you will.

Let's start by looking into what the word 'ascend' or 'ascension' means.

My handy, dandy Collins Concise Dictionary gives us the following:

1. to go or move up; to rise to a higher point or level
2. *in astronomy*: the rising of a star above the horizon
3. to become king or queen

Each of these definitions gives us an important insight into Jesus' ascension and its profound meaning. Let's start with the easy one first.

1. to go or move up; to rise to a higher point or level

On the surface, this seems straightforward enough. Jesus starts on earth and rises up to heaven.

But how? I'm not only referring to the levitational aspect, but to the fact that Jesus is a human being with a solid human body. How does He move up to heaven - isn't that a spiritual realm??

What kind of body does Jesus now have after His resurrection? Jesus demonstrated that He wasn't a ghost: He could be seen, touched, eat fish. But He could also appear and disappear, remain unrecognised and then suddenly known. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul tries to describe the resurrected body, the transformation which takes place.

In *Luke for Everyone*, Tom Wright states, "... in the Jewish world of the first century, [the resurrection] meant a new embodied life in God's new world... But the new body which will be given at the end is not identical to the previous one. In an act of new creation parallel only to the original creation itself, God will make a new type of material, no longer subject to death, out of the old one." It's definitely a physical body.

I think we get tangled up when we think about heaven. It is not merely a place where we go after we die. Heaven is God's space, the realm of God's Kingdom. It might be helpful to think of it as another dimension rather than a region somewhere in outer space. The point of the early Christians is for heaven to come to earth, for the life of God's Kingdom to arrive here on earth. We pray for in the Lord's prayer.

2. *in astronomy*: the rising of a star above the horizon

Once a star or planet has ascended, and moves towards its zenith, it can be clearly seen. It is no longer obstructed or hidden because of our location, because of geography. Look up, and there it is. (That is, as long as you are not fighting light pollution. But I digress.)

The same is true for Jesus. The full majesty, authority and glory of our Lord Jesus, often described as being 'seated at God's right hand,' can only be realised fully once he is no longer confined in time and place. His divine nature, once glimpsed during 30 years in ancient Palestine, can now be seen by all people everywhere. 'Seek and you will find.'

Jesus gives His presence here and now to His people through the Holy Spirit. It is only after Jesus has been crucified, resurrected, ascended and seated at the right hand of God can the Holy Spirit be sent at Pentecost. And this baptism of the Holy Spirit enables the work of the Kingdom to be continued through the followers of Jesus, wherever they may be.

3. to become king or queen

Queen Elizabeth II ascended to the throne at the death of her father, King George VI, on 6 February 1952. Her coronation was held more than a year later to allow an appropriate time of mourning to pass and for the elaborate ceremony and celebrations to be planned. But during this 14 month time, she was queen. Ascension, coronation and enthronement are not strictly synonymous. So too with Jesus.

And perhaps this is the really reason why the Ascension is not fully celebrated. For it is only after the current ruler dies that the new monarch can ascend to the throne. So it is only when we die to ourselves, only when we decide not to be the centre of the world, only when we decide we're not going to try to control everything around us — only then will it allow God's Kingdom to reign in our lives. Only then, can we enthrone Jesus.

CONFESSION

We are *all* guilty of putting ourselves at the centre of our world.

We are *all* guilty of failing to enthrone Jesus.

We confess, Lord, that we do not live as we wish.

And we ask You to become enthroned in our lives.

Lord, will You become the ruler, the monarch, the source of all that we are.

Will You call us out into all that You would have us become.

* We confess that we are too rooted to earth,
and that our glimpses of Your glory are quickly crowded out,
clouded over by our own anxieties and preoccupations.
When we are unable to look to the skies, to look to You,
Lord, help us to be aware that You are reaching out to us,
to know that, even in the great sweep of eternity,
we are precious in Your sight.
And, whether we glimpse You or not,
help us to know You are walking through this world with us
now and for evermore.

Lord, help us to lay our crowns down before You.
Help us to honour You as our holy, life-giving, eternal Lord and Saviour.
Amen.

* adapted from a prayer
© Rachel Poolman
St Cuthbert's Centre, Holy
Island, UK
[https://www.facebook.com/
StCuthbertsHolyIsland/posts/](https://www.facebook.com/StCuthbertsHolyIsland/posts/)

HYMN

We fall down (*Songs of Fellowship* 1582)

We fall down, we lay our crowns
at the feet of Jesus.
The greatness of mercy and love,
at the feet of Jesus.

And we cry holy, holy, holy.
And we cry holy, holy, holy.
And we cry holy, holy, holy
is the Lamb.

MEDITATION

by Nick Fawcett from '*No Ordinary Man 2*'

We stood there, speechless for a moment,
struck dumb by the enormity of it all,
for he was gone,
plucked away from before our very eyes
and, quite simply, we were lost for words,
stunned into silence.

It wasn't the first time, you see;
we'd lost him once already -
watched in horror as he was nailed to a cross, sealed in a tomb,
and we'd been devastated,
convinced we could never bounce back from such a blow.

We wouldn't have, either,
not by ourselves,
but suddenly he was back,
there in the garden,
there on the roadside,
there in the upper room -
our Lord, alive, risen, victorious,
death unable to hold him!

I just can't tell you how wonderful that was,
how our hearts skipped and our spirits soared
each time we saw him.

We felt certain nothing could ever again destroy our happiness,
for he had taken on the last enemy
and emerged triumphant!

Life, all at once, pulsated with promise,
no problem too great for us,
no challenge too daunting,
for, with Christ by our side, what had we to fear?

Yet suddenly, as we stood there that day gazing into heaven,
he was by our side no longer,
and for an awful moment
it seemed as though all our hopes had disappeared again,
vanishing with him like a bubble on the wind.

Only, of course, this time was different,
for we'd made time to listen,
paid heed to his warnings,
and we understood that, as he had departed,
so finally he would return.

You should see us now,
our faith, if anything, stronger today than it's ever been!

We've spoken more boldly and witnessed more powerfully
than I thought possible -
preaching the word,
healing the sick,
renewing the weak,
uplifting the broken-hearted,
carrying the good news of Jesus far and wide.

And I'll tell you why:

because his going that day
has somehow brought him closer than he's ever been before,
filling our whole being - body, mind and soul -
transforming our every thought and word and deed.

He's here,
he's there,
he's everywhere,
no person beyond his love,
no situation beyond his purpose,
for he has not simply risen,
he has ascended -

Jesus, the man who lived and died amongst us,
who shared our flesh and blood,
one with the Father,
Lord of lords and King of kings,
nothing in heaven or earth able to separate us
from the wonder of his love.

And sometimes when I think of all that means,
once more I'm struck dumb,
stunned into silence by the enormity of it all,
for it's wonderful, isn't it? -
almost too wonderful for words!

HYMN

More love, more power (*Songs of Fellowship* 392)

More love (more love),
More power (more power),
More of You in my life.
More love (more love),
More power (more power),
More of You in my life.

- 1 And I will worship You with all of my heart,
And I will worship You with all of my mind,
And I will worship You with all of my strength,
For You are my Lord.
- 2 And I will seek Your face with all of my heart,
And I will seek Your face with all of my mind,
And I will seek Your face with all of my
strength,
For You are my Lord,
You are my Lord.

PRAYER

In this time of prayer, let us try to pray without words
because words can never convey the depth of our heart.
Lord, stir up Your Holy Spirit.
Help us to bring Your Kingdom here and now.

Lord, You must grieve to see Your holy people at war.
And we think now of the situation in the Holy Land
 between Israel and Palestine,
 the senseless death
Lord, bring Your Spirit of peace.

Lord, we have moments when we do work together in harmony.
And we thank You for the strides that have been made as we tackle the coronavirus.
Lord, we are the lucky ones.
We think now of the situation, particularly in India:
 the suffering, worry, the death.
Lord, turn our eyes away from how this variant may effect us
 and renew in us Your love and compassion for others.
What can *we do*?

Lord, there are many now who feel oppressed,
 who lack the joy in their life.
Lord, help to revive our spirits.
Help us to see the possibilities that are ahead of us.

* Because Jesus has ascended
 and He is sitting at the right hand of God's throne,
 a new world is breaking through —
 a world of justice, freedom, compassion, mercy, and truth.
Lord, restore what has been distorted,
 renew what has been corrupted
 make whole what has been broken.

* adapted from prayer by
Christine Sine
[http://godspace-msa.com/
2014/05/13/ascension-day-
what-is-it-all-about/](http://godspace-msa.com/2014/05/13/ascension-day-what-is-it-all-about/)

Lord, help us to live Your Ascension.
Help us to become the people of Your kingdom.
Help us to seek Your face above all things.

And Lord now we gather together using the words that have been passed on
using the words of the Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer

Christian Aid Prayer

Risen and ascended Lord Jesus,
when we are numbed by the suffering of the world,
 take us back to the deep truth
 of Your power and glory,
 of Your invincible Kingdom,
 of Your promise of reconciliation.
In the knowledge of this truth,
 help us to bring our gaze to earth
 and find the strength to go into the world,
 to do Your will on earth as in heaven.
To build the kingdom of God
 on earth as it is in heaven.

from the Monthly Prayers of the **Christian Aid** website
<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

BLESSING

So in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Saviour,
I bless you
that you might know the presence of our living God
in your life,
in your relationships,
in what you do, no matter how small,
to bring truth, love and compassion to this world.
I bless you,
your loved ones,
and those you are called to love,
in the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

HYMN

At the name of Jesus (*Singing the Faith 317i • Songs of Fellowship 32*)

- 1 At the name of Jesus
every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess Him
King of glory now;
'tis the Father's pleasure
we should call Him Lord,
who from the beginning
was the might Word.
- 2 Humbled for a season,
to receive a name
from the lips of sinners
unto whom He came;
faithfully He bore it
spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious,
when from death He passed.
- 3 Bore it up triumphant
with its human light,
through all ranks of creatures
to the central height,
to the throne of Godhead,
to the Father's breast,
filled it with the glory
of that perfect rest.
- 4 In your hearts enthrone Him;
there let Him subdue
all that is not holy,
all that is not true;
crown Him as your Captain
in temptations hour,
let His will enfold you
in its light and power.
- 5 Brothers, this Lord Jesus
shall return again,
with His Father's glory,
with His angel-train;
for all wreaths of empire
meet upon His brow,
and our hearts confess Him
King of glory now.