

I'm writing this on Thursday 21st May 2020 and I'm wondering how you celebrated this special day. What's special about Thursday 21st May 2020 you may be asking - unless it's the date of your birthday or anniversary, of course? Thursday 21st May this year is actually one of the great feast days of the Christian Church - Ascension Day. In our Presbyterian tradition we don't go in for celebrating feast days and saint's days except the great celebrations of Christmas and Easter, but Ascension Day goes by without a trace, barely recognized—yet it is no minor episode. It's been said, *"Easter is incomplete, Pentecost is impeded, and the Second Coming is impossible without the Ascension"* (Robert Ramsey). Our Lord's ascension is a climactic, glorious event—it is His exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Paul writes, *"He who descended is the very One who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe"* (Ephesians 4:10). Jesus humbly came to this earth; He descended to a sin-ruined planet and went even to the gates of hell for us. Now He is seen returning to glory.

It's important that this event is described in the Bible. Luke tells us in Acts chapter 1 that it took place, *"before their very eyes."* He wants us to know that something tangible, something real took place. Just as with the Resurrection, it was important that there were eyewitnesses to this historical event. It was a unique and spectacular moment as they saw the cloud take their Master to His heavenly home; the cloud being an important Old Testament image of the presence and glory of God, first seen in the wilderness wanderings of the People of Israel on their way to the Promised Land. Luke records the event like this in the opening chapter of the follow up book to his Gospel, The Acts of the Apostles.

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with^[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit."

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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."

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."

Ascension is a forgotten day in the church. We focus on the fun and sentimentality of Christmas, or the great victory that was publicly won for us by Jesus guaranteeing the forgiveness of our sins and our entrance into heaven, namely Easter. But these are primarily days for us. In reality however, Jesus didn't come as an infant because He needed to experience life on earth - after all He had created this earth and he knew exactly what it was

like here. In the same way, He had no need *in Himself* to suffer and die for sins - no - He did that for us. The problem is, we continually turn everything inside out and upside down. We want to be the centre of attention, the focus of God's action. But we are not. God did not send the Lord Jesus Christ to die for you and me because He needed us, our redemption and forgiveness are for his glory. The ascension of Christ to heaven means that was raised up as King of kings and Lord of lords. As Paul puts it in Romans 14:9: "*For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*" Ascension is Jesus taking the throne that He battled for so diligently while on earth. Ascension is His coronation, the end of all His efforts for our salvation and so we sing to our King. "*Crown him with many crowns.*"

It seems longer, but it is just six months since we had a General Election in the UK. After all the bitter campaigning and the fighting between rival parties the result of an overwhelming victory for the Conservative Party was announced. Did they just do a victory dance and then go home? No, it wasn't the end it. The purpose of the election process was fulfilled when Boris Johnston was invited to meet with HM Queen Elizabeth and was asked, as Prime Minister, to form a government. Mr Johnston sought everyone's vote so that he could be Prime Minister - so that govern our nation.

To turn back to scripture; stopping at the resurrection would be like winning the election but not going on to rule in government. Jesus ascension - his coronation as King of kings and Lord of lords - was the final goal and purpose of his incarnation, his death on the cross and his resurrection.

Away back in the Old Testament David wrote a psalm that foretells of the ascension in wonderful imagery. For centuries the church has used Psalm 24 on Ascension Day.

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O 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!

Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?

The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!

Christians see Jesus as the King of Glory, first of all returning to heaven at the ascension and then coming again in glory to establish his eternal kingdom. This explains the repetition in the last two verses. We live in the time of Jesus victory and ascension and his coming again one day in glory.

As we find ourselves facing a time like no other in living memory with the coronavirus turning all our little worlds upside down, some are asking (as they have done every time there is some sort of disaster or crisis) - why does God allow this sort of thing to happen?

The last thing Jesus followers asked him before he ascended was along the same lines, it was about restoring the kingdom of Israel (see verse 6). They still expected him to rule like an earthly king and sort out the nation's problems. And in the same way, we want to say to him, "isn't it time you started to rule this world and sort out all its problems?"

The answer that his disciples received is that it's not for them to know God's plans but that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to witness to his message and to continue his work throughout the world. That isn't the answer they want to hear as they stood looking upwards and in awe and wonder as he disappeared. No doubt they had feelings of being abandoned, of emptiness, of lostness and, yes, of anger too. All they can do is turn and make their way back to the troubled city of Jerusalem, uncertain what will happen to them. They go to wait and to pray. And then, ten days later Jesus' promise was fulfilled on the day of the feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them and gave them the power within in themselves to continue Jesus' work in the world.

We may well find ourselves waiting and wondering what is going to happen, but we need to remember that Jesus' promise is for us too. Many promises were made six months ago before the General Election, yet no matter how sincere the people who made the promises were, they cannot guarantee the result. That's why the more astute ones always couch what they say in, "I plan to...", or "I will endeavour...". It's much harder to pin them down to simply, "I will do this or that". That's the difference that Christ's exaltation brings. He can say, "I will do what I promised, because ... *all power has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ... and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Mat 28:18,20). That's why he also said, "*If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*". Only a fool or the all-powerful King of kings and Lord of lords could make a promise like that.

Now that is crowned as ruler of the universe, Christ assures us of His control over every everything. Surely it is very comforting to us to know that nothing is outside His control and that everything is directed from His throne. We certainly cannot know the mystery of all God's ways, and from our present worldly perspective they often look very strange, but we can be sure that, for His people, whatever happens is always for our ultimate good, even if it doesn't look that way now. That is why Paul can say in Romans 8:28:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Let's hold on to that sure and certain promise.

Amen.