

Exalted to the highest place

*A sermon for Ascension Sunday morning, 2/6/2019, at Penrallt Baptist Church
(NB all quotes are from NIVUK 2011 unless noted otherwise)*

Today is Ascension Sunday and so this morning's sermon is going to be on the subject of the ascension of Jesus.

While I was first thinking about this sermon, I had a look at some of the art that has been produced on the subject over the centuries. I didn't find any particular inspiration for the sermon itself but I did find this picture I rather liked: **[slide 1]**

It's by a German artist I'd not heard of, called Gebhard Fugel, and was painted towards the end of the 19th century. The title of the painting is *Christi Himmelfahrt*, which means "Christ's journey to heaven". I think I was particularly drawn to it because of the chap there with the dark hair, close cropped on top but with a long beard. He sort of reminded me of a thinner version of myself.

Ascension Day is one of the great ecumenical Christian feasts, celebrated 40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost. By "ecumenical feast" I mean one which is widely celebrated across the many denominations of the Christian church.

Ascension Day was actually last Thursday, but the celebration is sometimes moved from the Thursday to to the following Sunday (that is, today), basically to make it easier for people to attend services. When it's celebrated on the Sunday it is, unsurprisingly, called Ascension Sunday.

In fact, the Ascension is often somewhat overlooked in favour of Easter and Pentecost but it is a vital link between the two, a point I'll return to later on.

The main account of the Ascension is in Acts 1. Peter Cousins will be preaching about that this evening, so I'm not planning to dwell on the event itself this morning. Instead, I want to focus on the implications for us of the fact that Jesus has ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

You may recognise that phraseology as coming from the Apostles' Creed.

The creed itself doesn't appear in the Bible as a whole but it is entirely biblical in the sense that everything in it is thoroughly based on and consistent with the Scripture; and many of the clauses in it are actually more or less direct quotations of Bible verses. The word "creed" comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning "I believe" and a creed is a statement of faith.

The Apostles' Creed is intended to provide a brief summary of the Christian faith rather than to be a comprehensive statement of everything we believe. We don't use it all that often here at Penrallt, but I'd like to pause at this point so we can declare it together **[Slide 2]**. *Note the potentially confusing word "catholic", but note too that it is spelt with a lowercase 'c'; it means "widespread" or "universal" and isn't specifically referring to the Roman Catholic church; this creed encapsulates the core faith of the whole Christian church across the world and throughout history:*

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

[version from Alister McGrath, "Affirming Your Faith: Exploring the Apostles' Creed", IVP, 1991]

This is supposed to be a sermon about the ascension. So let's go back to focussing on the clauses relating to the ascension, which I've highlighted:

1. Jesus ascended into heaven
2. He is seated at the right hand of the Father
3. He will come again to judge the living and the dead

We'll consider each of these in turn, but let's note first of all that there is a sequence of time built in to this list. The first one, Jesus ascended, has already happened; it's a past event. As a result, he is now seated at God's right hand - in the present. And, we are told, he will - at some unspecified point in the future - come again.

Jesus ascended into heaven

Jesus was with God, the Father, in the beginning (John 1:2) but he didn't remain in heaven. Instead we read in Philippians 2 that: **[Slide 3a]**

“[Jesus] being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:5-8)

This death was for us, to pay the penalty for our sin and to reconcile us to God. It is a gift that is freely given to us, but was bought at the greatest possible cost. And like any gift, we have to receive it to be able to make use of it. Jesus made salvation available to all, but this doesn't mean that everyone will be saved.

Jesus died, but he didn't stay dead. Paul skips over that bit in this passage in Philippians but it's mentioned in the Apostles' Creed that “he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.” In fact that last bit is more or less a direct quote from 1 Corinthians 15 (“he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”, v4).

That is, of course, talking about Easter, and the creed then moves straight to the ascension, the clause we're considering (“He ascended into heaven”), and this ties up with the next few verses from Philippians: **[Slide 3b]**

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:9-11)

You might be tempted to conclude that, having accomplished his earthly mission Jesus now retired to heaven secure in the knowledge of a job well done and ready to bask in his well-deserved glory for the rest of eternity. But there is more to it than that.

On the night before his death, Jesus spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper, as recorded in chapters 13 to 17 of John's gospel. During this discourse, he tells them that when he goes away, the Father will send the Holy Spirit, and he explains the purpose for this: **[Slide 4a]**

"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (Jn. 14:26)

The word Advocate here is a translation of the Greek word παράκλητος (*parakletos*). **[Slide 4b]** It's rendered variously in other translations as Comforter, Friend, Helper or Counselor (these were the ones I found in a not entirely random sampling of about a dozen English translations).

The Holy Spirit had, of course, been around since the very beginning. We read in Genesis 1 that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen. 1:2b). There are quite a few other references in the OT (only three that specifically call him the Holy Spirit but many more that refer to him as the Spirit of the Lord or the Spirit of God, or just the Spirit). There are also several references in the gospels where the Holy Spirit appears in a past or present context - for instance in bringing about Mary's pregnancy (Matt. 1:18) - rather than where people, such as Jesus here in John 14 are talking about a future coming of the Holy Spirit.

The difference is that the OT appearances of the Spirit, and the past or present ones in the gospels are isolated occasions - the Spirit doing specific things with specific individuals at particular times and places. What Jesus was talking about in the Upper Room discourse was the Holy Spirit living within all believers all the time and being part of our daily lives - a general outpouring of the Spirit.

References to past, present and future are, of course relative. For example the next thing I'm going to say is still in the future... Now I'm saying it, it's in the present... and now I've said it, it's in the past!

When Jesus was speaking in the Upper Room, this new phase in the Spirit's ministry was still in the future - about 53 days in the future as it happens.

The coming of the Holy Spirit, of course, took place at Pentecost which was 10 days after the Ascension and which we'll be celebrating next Sunday. As well as the roles mentioned in this verse **[Slide 5]**, teaching us and reminding us of Jesus' teaching, the Holy Spirit bears witness about Jesus (Jn. 15:26), lives in us (2 Tim. 1:14), functions as a seal to mark us as believers and as a deposit to guarantee our inheritance (Eph. 1:13f), produces fruit in us (Galatians 5:22f), distributes gifts so we can function as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12; put v4 on screen?) and enables us to worship Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) to take but a few of the New Testament verses

that refer to his work. Many deep sermons could be, and have been, preached on the work of the Holy Spirit. For now, suffice it to say that the Holy Spirit is not an optional extra but essential for our life as Christians.

And here's the bit where, as I said, the Ascension links Easter and Pentecost. **[Slide 6]** Jesus said in John 16:7 "Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Why this should be case I'm not sure, but I think Don Carson is on the right lines when he says in his commentary on John's gospel that it is "not that Jesus and the Holy Spirit cannot, for unarticulated metaphysical reasons, simultaneously minister to God's people" but that the widespread ministry of the Holy Spirit, initiated at Pentecost and indicated in the brief survey of verses we undertook a few moments ago, is a major characteristic of the "age of the kingdom of God... [which] cannot be fully inaugurated until Jesus has died, risen from the dead, and been exalted to the Father's right hand, returned to the glory he enjoyed with the Father before the world began." ["The Gospel According to John", D. A. Carson; Apollos, 1991]

If you prefer an explanation that doesn't sound quite so much like heavy-duty philosophy, you can just stick to the principle that Jesus said it, so we know it's true.

To summarise what we've been talking about so far: *Jesus ascended into heaven - and sent us his Holy Spirit*

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Moving on to the next clause of the Creed, we read that

Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father

To sit at the right hand of a dignitary is widely considered to be a sign of honour and status. This fits with a verse from the end of the first chapter of Hebrews: "To which of the angels did God ever say,

'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet?'" (Heb. 1:13)

This verse is actually quoting Psalm 110:1 and the context of the passage in Hebrews makes it clear that the answer is "none of them", God didn't say this to any of the angels, but he did say it to Jesus.

Interestingly (or at least I think so - you may disagree) I had assumed that the phrase “right-hand man” was connected to this sense of somebody being honoured by being seated at somebody else’s right hand, but when I looked it up I discovered this isn’t the case. Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable defines a right-hand man as “an invaluable, or confidential, assistant” and explains that the term was originally applied to the cavalryman at the right-hand end of the line, whose duties were of great responsibility.

Anyway, Jesus is seated at God’s right hand in a position of honour, rather than at the right-hand end of a line of cavalry (in a saddle).

The honour is, of course, entirely fitting and accords with what we read earlier about God having “exalted him to the highest place”. But there is another aspect of the heavenly seating arrangement that has great significance for us.

Seated as he is at God’s right hand, Jesus has the Father’s ear. The Bible tells us that **[Slide 7a]** “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.” (Romans 8:34).

The writer to the Hebrews (who probably wasn’t Paul) also tells us the same thing: **[Slide 7b]** “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

So, Jesus is seated at God’s right hand - and intercedes for us

I don’t know about you, but I find this thought - this fact - very comforting.

There’s a whole bunch of stuff in the book of Hebrews that ties in with Jesus’ role as our Intercessor. James Goodman is preaching his way through Hebrews in some of our evening services at the moment so I don’t want to say too much about it now, but these verses from the end of chapter 4 are ones I find particularly inspiring: **[Slide 8]**

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, 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 feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Verse 16 (the bit from “Let us then approach...”) in particular is quite an encouragement to pray boldly, and I think we can apply it not just to prayers for ourselves but prayers for other people.

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God always answers prayer, although the answer may perhaps not always be the one we are expecting or at the time we are expecting it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assures us that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matt. 6:8b). He certainly isn’t implying that we therefore don’t need to bother praying, because he goes straight on to teach us how to pray using the Lord’s Prayer as a model. Later in the same sermon, Jesus says “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11).

I must confess that I find it difficult to get really stuck into prayer most of the time, and I certainly wouldn’t consider myself to be a natural prayer warrior. However, over the years I’ve more and more come to the conclusion that the point of prayer isn’t to try and get what we want from God, as if he were some kind of cosmic slot machine, but to put ourselves into a place where God can transform our minds and align us with his will - his “good, pleasing and perfect will” as Paul describes it in Romans 12:2.

Sometimes, especially when I’m talking to relatively new Christians, I find people getting hung up on whether or not they should pray for some issue or other. It’s generally because they are worried that the thing is too trivial to bother God with and that he’s got more important business to worry about.

If you ever find yourself in that situation, allow me to let you into a secret: God loves you. And he has infinite bandwidth.

Perhaps I should put the second half of that in slightly less geeky terms. I mean that even if everybody in the whole world were to start praying simultaneously, God would still be able to hear and respond to all our prayers, all at once. You really don’t need to worry that you’d be clogging up God’s limited resources with trivial fluff when he’s got important stuff that needs handling, because God’s resources are not limited.

And because he loves you he cares about the “trivial fluff” as well as the big stuff.

I was blessed this week because the Lord gave me a wonderful sermon illustration before I even asked for it. A friend of mine has been looking after another friend’s kittens while they are away and she sent me a text message a few days ago to ask me to pray because one of them had gone out and not come back. I prayed as requested, and knowing my friend I’m sure I’m not the only one she asked to pray (and she was certainly praying herself too) so I can’t really take any particular credit for the outcome but within 15 minutes I received another text message to say the kitten had returned.

I could give you quite a few more stories about answered prayer - most of them taking a bit longer, or in some cases a lot longer, to come through, but I think you get the general idea.

There's just one more thing I want to say on the subject of prayer for now, which is that it's important to remember that it's not just a one-way communication. It's not, or shouldn't be, just about us talking to God but also, and perhaps even more so, about us listening to him. I remember being delighted when I started to learn Welsh to discover that whereas in English we usually talk to someone, in Welsh we "siarad efo rhywun". Literally that translates as "talk with" and although that is a viable construction in English it seems to be much more hard-wired into the Welsh verb. When we pray we should be aiming to talk with God, rather than just talking to him (which can so easily descend into merely talking at him). That means making space to listen, which can be a difficult discipline as we can be so easily distracted, but it's vitally important. As the psalm says: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10)

Let's move on to our final clause of the Apostle's Creed as it relates to the ascension. We've seen that Jesus ascended into heaven (and sent us his Holy Spirit) and that he is seated at the right hand of the Father (and intercedes for us).

The next sentence tells us that:

He will come again to judge the living and the dead

Quite a few people like to say that all roads lead to God.

In one sense, I believe they are correct - but not in the way that most of them mean.

Jesus was very clear in his statement: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6).

It is only through Jesus that we can enter into a love relationship with God and to "enjoy him forever" (as the Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us is the chief end of the human race).

But every single person who ever lived will sooner or later stand before God in judgement.

This is doubtless not a very popular teaching in this day and age, if it ever was, but as Donald reminded us last week, the job of the preacher is not to please their hearers but to faithfully preach the word of God. And the word of God contains plenty of references to judgement, in the sense of God's final judgement of sin. The specific

one that's borrowed for the Apostles' Creed, as far as I can make out, is from 2 Timothy 4: **[Slide 9a]**

"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: preach the word; be prepared..." (2 Tim. 4:1-2a)

Jesus himself testified that he would be our judge, stating in John 5 **[Slide 9b]** that "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (Jn. 5:22).

I know some of you fairly well, and there are others here that I don't know at all. But I know one thing about all of you. You are all sinners.

I know that because I am one too. However much I might like to think of myself as a good person, I don't have to search too deeply to know that I fall woefully short of God's standards, and there are times when I can be a pretty scummy individual. For myself at least, I can confirm the truth the Bible teaches, that **[Slide 10a]** "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). And the Bible also tells us that **[Slide 10b]** "the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23a).

Jesus is going to be my judge and he knows everything I have ever done, said, or thought. There's no pulling the wool over his eyes. The way the law works is not to weigh up all the good stuff we've done against all the bad stuff and see which comes out on top; if I've broken the law on any point, be it ever so small, I am guilty. And, much as I may try to convince myself otherwise I don't have to search my heart very deeply at all to know that I am, for want of a better phrase, as guilty as sin.

Things are looking pretty bleak for me. Or they would be apart from one fact. I have a really good defense lawyer. And his name is Jesus.

I'm not an expert on human judicial systems but I doubt you'd ever find one where the judge is also the defender. But the apostle John writes in his first letter that **[Slide 11a]** "... if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." (1 Jn. 2:1b). Interestingly, John is here using the title "advocate" to refer to Jesus, while we saw earlier that in John's gospel, Jesus himself used the same word (*parakletos*, in the Greek; advocate in this translation) to refer to the Holy Spirit.

In a human legal system, my defence lawyer would probably try to defend me by undermining the evidence for my guilt presented by the prosecution, or by attempting to convince the jury that I was not such a bad person after all and they should go easy on me. Jesus doesn't work like that.

Skipping back a few verses to the end of the previous chapter we read that **[Slide 11b]** “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” but “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 Jn. 1:8-9)

So Jesus, who is our judge, is also our advocate but will only defend us if we admit our guilt. He is our only hope. If we try to stand on our own righteousness we will be found guilty and condemned as our sins deserve. If we submit ourselves to Jesus, and confess our sins to him, he will wash us clean in his precious blood, shed for us on the cross, and replace our filthy rags with his garments of salvation. We shall be able to stand before him, and with him, declaring with the prophet Isaiah:

“I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.”
(Is. 61:10a)

If we accept Jesus and submit to him as our Saviour, if we willingly bow the knee and acknowledge him as our Lord, with all that his Lordship implies for his authority over every area of our lives, then and only then will we be declared not guilty in the day of judgement.

To summarise, here are my 3 main points again: **[Slide 12]**

1. *Jesus ascended into heaven - and sent us his Holy Spirit*
2. *Jesus is seated at God's right hand - and intercedes for us*
3. *Jesus will judge us all - and gives us our only hope for acquittal*

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