

Sermon: Jesus' last words

Acts 1:1-11

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

The last words of someone who dies are often very important for us. Sometimes those last words can be awful, and destroy the people who stay behind. Or if they are loving words, spoken to the family that stays behind, they can create beautiful memories of the person who passed away. I think you remember the last words of some of your family members and friends, and they usually have special meaning for us.

Today we have read the last words of Jesus, before we went to heaven on Ascension Day.

Those last words are important and worthwhile considering. What did Jesus tell us?

1 Restore kingdom to Israel?

Jesus had appeared during a period of 40 days to the disciples, and he had been eating with them, and speaking with them.

Imagine that we would know what they discussed...

If Jesus had discussed anything that was radically different from what we have read in the Gospels, I am sure the apostles would have spoken about it; and Luke would have written about it. But as we hear nothing from them I think it is fair to assume that what He discussed, was not new.

I guess Jesus went with them over what he had been teaching them previously. Because it was after Jesus' death and resurrection, that the disciples finally understood many of the things Jesus had said previously. "Ahhh now we understand what you meant when you said that this temple will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days".

Luke only writes that Jesus spoke with them about the Kingdom of God. What does this mean?

From earliest times, Israel had recognized God to be the King - a King with a worldwide reign. But Israel also believed that God's kingship was mostly manifested where people obey him. And so, for Israel, God's kingdom was practically similar to the kingdom of Israel. And the kings of Israel were seen as God's vice-regents on earth.

When Israel lost its independence, and when Israel no longer had a royal family, its views of God's kingdom shifted slightly. Prophets like Daniel had a new message about God's rule over the whole world - not over Israel only.

This is what we read in Daniel 7:14: after the Son of Man enters into heaven - this is a true Ascension Day verse - after he enters into heaven to appear before God, he receives dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion.

So even in the time of the Old Covenant, God widened the view of Israel to see that eventually, God's kingdom would be worldwide, not only for Israel.

Surely, that was good to know... but Israel, trampled by the oppressive Roman Empire, preferred to focus on how God had chosen them only. "We are the people of God, and all the others are not", was the common Jewish attitude.

No wonder it was hard for the disciples of Jesus to change their outlook. It took them time and mental energy to make this complete paradigm shift.

Without the Holy Spirit who was about to come, it was impossible to make this mental change. Jesus told them to wait for the coming of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit had been promised in the Old Testament as God's presence in the lives of all believers.

This centuries old promise was about to be fulfilled, and only then the disciples would truly begin to understand the Gospel-message of Jesus Christ.

So when the disciples asked whether Jesus would now restore the kingdom to Israel, they were widely off the mark. John Calvin calls it a dumb question.

But that is not very kind. It was a logical question, within the framework of Israel's self-image as God's only chosen nation. Within that framework it was logical. Their question was the last flicker of their former burning passion for an imminent political theocracy - with themselves as its chief executives of course.

But the Holy Spirit was about to burst this framework. Israel was indeed God's chosen nation, but it was chosen for the sake of the world. God had plans far beyond Israel. And Jesus in the first place, and his 12 disciples with him, were God's bridgehead for bursting that outdated framework and for making Israel truly God's blessing for the world.

Jesus' answer: "It is not your business to know when God will act." With this, Jesus answers the question whether God will NOW restore the Kingdom.

2 Be my witnesses

I have good christian friends who say: "you see, they ask for the restoration of the nation of Israel, so that is what we should expect. Jesus does not contradict their question, he simply says, when it will happen in only known to the Father."

I think this a misreading of the passage. Jesus does directly contradict their Israel-Centric expectation of a kingdom for Israel. Instead of focusing on Israel, he focuses on the whole world.

"You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and then in Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth." The work of God is not inbound, but outbound. Yes, Israel is important, but not for its own sake, but for the world.

With this, Jesus answers their mistaken idea that this world will end with Israel being a strong political theocratic nation. That is a misunderstanding of the role that God has reserved for Israel.

Isaiah already announced this to Israel, in Isaiah 43:10: "You shall be my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant that I have chosen". This is now to be fulfilled through the apostles.

And of the Messiah, Isaiah prophesied in 49:6, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel: I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Israel's task had always been to be a light for the nations; when Jesus came, it started to truly fulfill this task through Jesus, and then his Jewish disciples were told to witness in Jerusalem and beyond and in the whole world. What we read in Acts 1 is fully in line with the prophecies of the Old Testament.

And what we read there shows that the dream of a kingdom for Israel was indeed misguided. God has a world-vision. He wants the whole world to know him and obey him. The ends of the earth, reaching the whole world with the Gospel, that is what we should be occupied with, not with an earthly kingdom of Israel.

These were Jesus' last words. Important to remember. The role of the apostles was to reach the world. And the church is based on the foundation of Jesus Christ and the apostles. So as a church our role is very similar.

The last words of Jesus were about the mission of the church. Yes, we exist to be a pastoral community; yes we exist to praise God; yes we exist to live a good Christian life. But all that loses much of its value if we do not witness to the world. If we keep our mouth closed and if our life does not show Jesus Christ to the people we meet.

Heed these final words of Jesus.

And the task of the church is not just to witness to the people we meet, to our Jerusalem, but also to speak to people who are further away. People of different faiths, people from other countries.

And what an opportunities we have for doing this here in Cairo. We meet people from all over the world. The last words of Jesus: be my witness. Tell people about me.

3 You will receive power

Yes, this is not so easy. God knows.

And that is why he gave his Holy Spirit to the church.

Next week we will of course celebrate Pentecost - then we will think more about the work of the Spirit.

But for today, let me underline two things the Spirit did for the early church - and for us.

First, thanks to God's direct work in the life of the apostles, they were able to make this enormous paradigm shift. God, by the work of his spirit in their minds and hearts, enabled them to move from being inward looking, and Israel-focused, to being outward looking, and world-oriented.

And for being witnesses in this world, the Holy Spirit gave them insight, and strength. Just as we, today, need wisdom and power from God, to talk about the Gospel with other people.

He gives us this task, but with that task, Jesus also gives the strength. He never asks us things beyond our abilities, and with his Spirit he has enabled us to witness for him.

We cannot do without the Holy Spirit if we want to know and serve God. That is why Jesus ordered his disciples to stay in Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Father, which is the Baptism with the Holy Spirit.

We need to be immersed in the Holy Spirit - in God - to know Him and to serve him. Without this we simply do not have the knowledge and the strength.

But be encouraged, this Spirit has come and is now part of the life of all believers in Jesus Christ. So we have no excuse.

And to the extent that we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives, we can know God and serve him. So it is important for us to stay close to God and always ask him to give us a refill. We can never have enough of God's Spirit, God's presence in our lives.

We can know God, we know his will. And his will was expressed so clearly in the last words of Jesus Christ before he went to heaven.

The one who would receive dominion, glory, a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him, his last words were: "You will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, and to the end of the earth."

The one who rules this universe, he is telling us: speak of him, talk to people about him, represent him in all circumstances.

And that is I think the heart of the matter - the king of heaven and earth is making us to be his representatives. We speak of him, we speak of his will, and we live as he would live on earth, as we want to be worthy representatives.

conclusion

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for the whole world, because he is the master of the universe. That is why any narrow focus, whether that is on Israel, or on our own country, or on our own denomination, is not in accordance with our Lord Jesus Christ.

With his Spirit he can help us to break through our own myopia and to be citizens of this world. And in this world, we speak of Jesus Christ.

His Holy Spirit is specialized in breaking through our self-created walls of separation, to see the others as valuable people, and He helps us to speak to them about what is most valuable for ourselves and for them. Knowing the Lord of this Universe.

The Ascension of our Lord to the throne room of this universe is a day to celebrate: our Lord rules. And it is a day to be reminded of our mission. He wants the whole world to know, and we are his representatives for this task. Those were his last words to us.

Amen