

Sermon: Ascension of Jesus

Luke 24:50-53

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This coming Thursday is Ascension Day. In my country, The Netherlands, this is actually a national holiday. I remember in my youth we would go to church in the morning. But of all Christian feasts, it seems that Ascension Day is almost forgotten.

But it is certainly an important event in the life of Jesus, for the life of the church, yes for our world. But what does it mean, for us, today?

1. Jesus is Lord

We see Jesus going up to heaven and his are disciples looking up, as you could read in the somewhat longer account of the same event in Luke's other book, the book of Acts.

Look up at heaven is actually also the attitude of many Christians - they think this world is not so important, and their faith is all about looking forward to heaven. As if this world is bad and heaven is the only good thing.

This is a wrong dualistic attitude, as if anything physical is not as important as anything "spiritual" and as if this tangible world is in a way less true or real or important than the world of God. As if God is not fully related to our world.

So what is the Ascension of Jesus about?

The Evangelist John, in his gospel, has recorded a prayer of Jesus that relates to his ascending into heaven.

Jesus [...] looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (John 17:1-5, NIV)

This prayer shows that the ascension of Jesus was in fact his glorification - we see that Jesus in fact returned to the glory that He had enjoyed with the Father even before the world began. Even before creation.

Before Jesus had come to earth, as the Son of God He had lived in eternal bliss with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity enjoyed the purest fellowship, and love, and joy in His own Being.

No wonder that the disciples, when the Lord Jesus Christ blessed them while He ascended into heaven, fell down before Him, worshipping Him, and praising God.

The Lord was in the process of returning to his former glory, and this led the disciples to worship. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, who even conquered death.

Our Lord, who is present in his church, who is the cornerstone of his temple, who is also the head of his body - the church - is no-one less than God almighty.

2. Jesus is creator of this our life

He existed before this world even existed. He was even involved in creating our wonderful world. He made you, he made elephants, he made the oceans and the mountains.

With the Father and the Holy Spirit our Lord sat on his throne and together they rejoiced in creating our wonderful world; our Lord Jesus laughed when as a team they designed whales, cats, monkeys, flowers, and human beings.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit rejoiced together when they made the mountains and the oceans. Our Lord enjoyed hanging the sun and the moon and the stars in the heavens. They loved creation.

Ascension Day is the day on which Jesus - the creator of all things - went back to sit with God in the throne of the universe. He went back home, to fully participate in the life of the Holy Trinity again. To sit in the control-room of the universe again.

This does not indicate that heaven is more important than this world - God does not look with disdain at this world. He made it, the soil, the water, the people, the animals, the plants. He loved making it, he loves maintaining it. Do we show similar love for his creation, or do we only look up to heaven?

He created our ecosystems, the rain forests, the oceans. As the crown of creation, He made us humans as social beings, made for community with him and with each other.

If God did this and he loved all that, then we may miss out on God if we do not share the same love for this his world. Our world.

We must never think that we are just passing through and that it is really heaven that Christian life is about. This world of us is made by God, and God loves it.

3. God embraced humanity

So Jesus went back to the Father and after his ascension all was back to normal again? As when before Jesus was born? No. Not really.

Because something then changed in the Trinity. The Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is eternally God, but He also became a true man at Christmas, born from the Virgin Mary. His coming to our world, become one of us, in itself underlines that for God, the tangibility of humankind and this world was not bad. The opposite: He adopted humanity.

After his resurrection, Jesus no longer had a physical body, but even then, the wounds could be seen in his hands and feet.

The Apostle John, in his book of Revelation, describes Jesus in heaven, after his ascension, as 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain'. (Rev. 5:6, NIV)

When Jesus ascended to be seated on his throne, God thereby adopted something human into the eternal and perfect life of the Trinity. How? It would be presumptuous to even try to answer this. We do not know of course.

But Jesus bringing something human into God is yet another clear indication that this tangible world is important for God. He is not adverse to this world - he has lovingly adopted it into his existence. So we must reject the dualism as if this world is not important and heaven, or eternity is all.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, even the Gospel of his ascension, is that God and this world are now reconciled. Heaven and earth come together.

In his beautiful anti-dualistic letter, the apostle John describes Jesus. Listen carefully to what the Apostle describes:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1-4, NIV)

John uses terms like eternal life, fellowship, and joy; these are qualities of life that are part and parcel of the inner life of the Holy Trinity. And John speaks with the same ease about seeing, feeling, touching, hearing our Lord. God became tangible.

The Christian faith does not know of a dualistic contradiction between this world and the world of God - they have been reconciled in Jesus Christ.

These great eternal-life qualities have been made available to us! They have been made available to those who by faith have fellowship with God.

John unpacks this idea in the book of Revelation. He says to the church in Laodicea:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. (Rev 3:21, NIV)

This is the *grand finale* of the ascension of Jesus Christ. He returned to the throne of God, to the intimate life in the Trinity, but He also draws us up into the eternal fellowship and joy of the Holy Trinity. That is our destiny, the goal of our redemption: It is participation in the community of the Holy Trinity.

But this expectation of participation in God is not escapism. Our community is with the God who created this world, who redeems this world, who embraces this world. He loves your daily life. Your prayers but also how you wash dishes, how you repair your car, how you take care of your garden, how you vote, how you eat, how you sleep.

Conclusion

What does this mean for us today?

- 1) In our daily life, his ascension most certainly leads us to recognising his Lordship. He rules his church and he rules his world from the divine control room. This is comforting because the one who rules heaven and earth, has deep knowledge of and love for humankind. And of you.
- 2) It is also clear that our Trinitarian view of God is not an add-on to the Christian faith, but it is the heart of our faith. Only a Trinitarian view of God makes communion in and with God possible.
- 3) And as God adopted humanity into himself, we also hold a very high view of each person we meet with. God cares for mankind.
- 4) He also care for this world, in the first place because it is his own creation, and because it is the ecosystem in which his beloved human beings live. Live your life to the full in this world - the world that God created, and care for it!
- 5) I think it is clear that we must wholeheartedly reject the individualism that is so rampant in our society. God made us for eternal communion with Him; He draws us into his own communal life. And so we cannot avoid to also live in communion with one another in his Church. God is the inventor of community and we need each other as he created us as communal beings.
- 6) The community of the saints is where we get a certain foretaste of the life in God; in the community with one another we experience a little bit of that, as if a small down payment of what is to come.

But the expectation of better things in the future, when God will be all in all, does not make this world less important. The opposite is true - because we expect the renewal of all things, this world, nature, your life, your daily life, all this is incredibly important and this whole world we live in is to be taken care of , and loved.

7) For God there is no contradiction between physical and spiritual. He even uses bread and wine to communicate himself to us.

Even our eucharist shows that for God, this world in which we live is not wrong; it is not less; it is not something to escape from. It is where we find God.

Amen

