

WE ARE NOT ALONE
Sermon for Ascension Day, 2021
Acts 1:1-11

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading read before, Acts 1:1-11: ¹ **In my former book, Theophilus, I have written about everything that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.**

³ **After His suffering, Jesus also showed these men, through many convincing proofs, that He was alive. He was seen by them during a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ While He was eating with them, He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, “You have heard about this from Me. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but not many days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”**

⁶ **Therefore, when they met together, they asked Him, “Lord, are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

⁷ **He told them, “It is not for you to know the times or events that the Father has set by His own authority. ⁸ However, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the farthest parts of the world.”**

⁹ **After He had said this and while they were watching Him, He was lifted up and a cloud took Him away from their sight. ¹⁰ While they were gazing into the sky as He was going, suddenly two men in white clothes stood beside them. ¹¹ They asked, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing and looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go into heaven.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We can learn a lot about the Ascension of our Lord from the information that Luke provides in the First Reading and the Gospel Reading for today. From them, Luke informs us that the Ascension took place near Bethany.¹ Bethany was east of Jerusalem, just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. Luke also tells us, **“After His suffering, Jesus also showed these men, through many convincing proofs, that He was alive. He was seen by them during a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”** That is why we celebrate the Ascension forty days after our celebration of Easter. Luke also provides an account of what the witnesses saw at the Ascension when he writes, **“After He had said this and while they were watching Him, He was lifted up and a cloud took Him away from their sight.”** Luke does give us a lot of information about the Ascension of our Lord, but there are some things that he *does not* say.

For example, many people just assume that once the cloud took Jesus away from the sight of the disciples, that He just kept on going up, and up, and up. They assume that Jesus simply left the earth behind and is now far, far away. They think that Jesus is watching the big picture from somewhere way far away. From that far off “command centre,” He gets involved with the important things that happen in this world, but for the most part, He has more significant, more important things to do than to keep an eye on us.

The Bible teaches something different. When we read Luke’s account carefully, we realise that he only tells what the disciples saw. After that, Luke tells us nothing. Is Jesus riding around on the clouds just out of our sight like some sort of surfer in the sky? Did the cloud hide a door in the sky that goes from time into eternity? If all we had was Luke’s account, then Jesus could have gone anywhere after the cloud hid Him.

If we want to know what happened after the cloud hid Jesus, then we must look elsewhere in the Bible, and here is where our Second Reading for today, Paul’s Letter to the Church in Ephesus really helps us. In this reading, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the mouth of the Apostle Paul, tells of the great work of God. Paul says that God *“worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule, authority, power, dominion and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² He also put everything under His feet and appointed Him as the Head of*

¹ Luke 24:50

everything, for the benefit of the church, ²³ which is His body, filled completely by Him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:20–23). These words fill in many of the blanks concerning the Ascension of our Lord.

First of all, Paul wanted his hearers to understand that the Ascension was not just a movement in time and space but also a recognition of authority. When we hear that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, it is helpful to think about what it means that an earthly monarch sits on a throne. For example, we say that Queen Elizabeth sits on the throne in London. That does not mean that she must sit on that throne 24/7 until the day she dies. Instead, it means that she reigns as queen over the United Kingdom. It means that she has the right to sit on that throne by virtue of her office as queen. When we hear that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, it means that *He reigns with His Father over all things*. It means that Jesus has taken humanity into the Holy Trinity by virtue of the fact that *He is both God and man*. Christ’s Ascension means that a Man has ascended to rule over all things.

The other thing that Paul proclaims is that Jesus is the One *who fills everything in every way*. Here Paul is proclaiming that Jesus is not confined to one place. He is everywhere. Furthermore, He is not everywhere just as God. Because Jesus is *both* God and man, He is everywhere as God and man. We say that Christ *communicates* the attributes of His divine nature to His human nature. Because He is one person who is both God and man, everything He does and is, He does and is as both God and man.

So, when we contemplate the Ascension of the Christ, we should not think, “Up, up, and away!” Instead, we think, “Up, up, and out!” Jesus’ Ascension does not mean He is gone. It means He is with us everywhere. He is with us as both man and God. In reality, Jesus is closer to each of us now than if we could see Him with our physical eyes.

We have already seen this at work during the forty days Jesus appeared to His disciples after He rose from the dead. He left the tomb without bothering to move the stone away from the door. He had a conversation with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus and then simply disappeared after He broke bread with them. Later on that same night, He suddenly showed up in a locked room in the middle of His disciples. He did precisely the same thing a week later and had a special talk with Thomas. He came and went and appeared and disappeared at will. He was always with the disciples, but they could not always see Him. He got them used to the idea that even though they could not see Him, He was always with them.

Jesus has made many promises to His church that He would not be able to keep if it weren’t for the fact that He *communicates* His divine attributes to His human nature. Today, we heard that Jesus ascended into heaven, but elsewhere Jesus has made the promise, “*Certainly, I am with you always, until the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). Then there is the promise that Jesus made in the sacrament itself when He “*took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me!”*” ²⁰ *In the same way He took the cup after the supper, saying, “This cup is the new Covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you”* (Luke 22:19–20). How can Jesus make all these promises to be with us and then go and ascend into heaven?

If Jesus were a mere human being, these passages would make no sense. But because Jesus is both God and man, He can fulfil these passages easily. The divine nature of Jesus communicates the ability to be *everywhere* to the human nature of Jesus. The Ascension does not mean that Jesus went away. Instead, it means that He is always with us no matter where we go or what we do.

This eternal presence of God with us means that Jesus is always with us in His full deity *and* His full humanity. The very body with the prints of the thorns, the marks of the nails, and the hole of the spear is with us even though we cannot see it. In a way that we cannot understand, all His forgiveness, all His love, and all His comfort is with each and every one of us in the crucified and risen human body of Jesus Christ.

I feel sorry for those who reject the possibility that the divine nature of Jesus communicates its attributes to the human nature of Jesus. It means that they believe that the bread and wine of the sacrament only *represent* the body and blood of Christ. It means that there is no forgiveness, but only a *symbol* of forgiveness. It means there is no love of Christ in the sacrament, but only a representation of the love of Christ. It means that there is no comfort in the cup, but only a symbol of the comfort of Christ. When people reject the divine power communicated to the human nature of Jesus, there is no real Gospel. Instead, there is merely a symbol of the Gospel.

Christ has ascended to fill everything in every way. He not only dwells in heaven, but He also dwells with us both as God and as man. He still is Immanuel, God with us.² He continuously brings us the gifts that He has earned for us with

² Matthew 1:23

His life, suffering, death, and resurrection. He is with us with His real love, His real forgiveness, His real comfort, His real salvation, and His real eternal life.

The Ascension of our Lord means that the God-man Jesus Christ is fully with us even though we cannot see Him. However, the good news is that the day is coming when we shall see Him. Luke says that ¹⁰ **While they were gazing into the sky as He was going, suddenly two men in white clothes stood beside them.** ¹¹ **They asked, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing and looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come back in the same way as you have seen Him go into heaven.”** Jesus will come again. We shall see Him again face-to-face, for the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write, *“For now we see dimly in a mirror but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part but then I shall know just as I am fully known”* (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Until that day comes, we can rest in the assurance that we are never alone. Christ our Lord, true God and true man is always with us. We have His forgiveness, His love, His comfort, and His strength. The world will do all it can to separate us from Him. It will discourage us. It will attack us. It will persecute us. Jesus Himself has warned us, *“In the world you have distress”* (John 16:33). Nevertheless, He has also said, *“Have courage! I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). The one who has overcome the world is now ascended into heaven in order to fill all things. He has ascended so that He could be with us to the close of the age. For now, He is with us always, even though we can't see Him. At the end of the age, we shall see Him, and those who believe in Him will see Him forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR ASCENSION DAY

Lord God, heavenly Father, You are our strength and our song. We praise You that You have prepared salvation for us in Jesus, Your Son. We praise You for His life on earth as a human being like us, full of grace and truth. We praise You that You have revealed Yourself and Your love in Him. We thank You for Jesus' death and resurrection. We praise You that our Lord, who has offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, is now at Your right hand. Give us Your Spirit's power to believe all that He has taught us, and to do all that He has commanded us. Accept our thanks for His miracles and deeds of mercy.

By Your Spirit, help us to claim His sacrifice for our salvation, and to trust in Him for the gift of eternal life. As we now celebrate His ascension to Your right hand, give us constant joy. Enable us to centre our devotion on our living Lord on heaven's throne, ruling all things for the good of His Church and His children. Lift our minds to heaven where our Lord Jesus lives to pray for us. Give us confidence in His compassion, and in His power to bless.

Lord Jesus, continue to be present with us, as You have promised. Be present with us as You move us to witness to Your saving love to people everywhere, that Your Gospel may be proclaimed to all nations. Establish Your kingdom of grace in every land. Turn the hearts of people in every corner of the world to faith and obedience, so that every knee may bow and every tongue confess that You are both Christ and Lord.

Lord Jesus, with all things under Your feet, keep our land in righteousness and peace. Give us leaders who love and honour You. May Your Spirit hold sway in all schools, and in all institutions of learning and research. Bless all hospitals and places of mercy; and make Your healing touch evident in them. Protect us from war, disease, and every calamity; spare us from greed, rebellion, and lawlessness. Give all in our land a true love of piety and peace.

We pray for all who are suffering in any way, especially for those who are sick. Give them trust in Your love, and teach them to pray in patience and hope.

Lord Jesus, seated at God's right hand, preserve our faith and love during life's little day, and strengthen us to watch and pray for Your return. Make us glad that, when You come again, You will come to receive us to Yourself for ever. We offer these prayers, Christ our Lord, in Your name, which is far above every other name. Amen.

THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

Acts 1:1-11

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given Instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.

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eating with them, He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "You have heard about this from Me. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but not many days from now you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

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Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ For this reason, since I heard about the faith that you have in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's holy people, ¹⁶ I do not stop thanking God for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that you may know Him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your minds will be enlightened, that you may know the hope to which He has called you, how rich His glorious inheritance is among His holy people, ¹⁹ and how incomparably great His power is for us, who believe according to the working of His mighty power. ²⁰ He worked with that same power in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule, authority, power, dominion and every other name that can be mentioned, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² He also put everything under His feet and appointed Him as the Head of everything, for the benefit of the church, ²³ which is His body, filled completely by Him who fills everything in every way.

Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ He told them, "These are the very words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, namely, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what Scripture has

said: 'The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and, based on His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' ⁴⁸ You will testify to these things.

⁴⁹ "I am sending you what My Father has promised. Wait here in the city until you are armed with power from above!"

⁵⁰ He led them out to where Bethany lay ahead of them. Then He raised His hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up to heaven.

⁵² They knelt in worship of Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ They stayed continually at the Temple, praising God.