

# Sermon for Ascension Day 2024

*Acts 1: 4-11*

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; <sup>5</sup> for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

<sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

<sup>7</sup> He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

<sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

<sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

*Psalm 93*

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;

the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.

He has established the world; it shall never be moved;

<sup>2</sup> your throne is established from of old;

you are from everlasting.

<sup>3</sup> The floods have lifted up, O LORD,

the floods have lifted up their voice;

the floods lift up their roaring.

<sup>4</sup> More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,  
more majestic than the waves of the sea,  
majestic on high is the LORD!

<sup>5</sup> Your decrees are very sure;  
holiness befits your house, O LORD,  
forevermore.

*Luke 24: 44-53*

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup> You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup> And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. <sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. <sup>52</sup> And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

A member of one of our churches in the Camelot parishes recently went as the representative of a charity to deliver humanitarian aid to the Ukraine.

On Sunday morning, he tried to go to church. Two things struck him as he tried to do this. First of all, there were queues of people outside the church wanting to get in. Sometimes we can come across this with a large funeral but how often does this happen to us on ‘just’ a normal Sunday?

And then when he did manage to get in, he noticed how many widows and fatherless children he met among the congregation.

So what, we might ask, does this have to do with Ascension Day and what does this tell us about the power and majesty of God's kingdom?

It reminds us that these truths of Christ's triumph and exaltation have meant the most to the church not in the easy circumstances of power and prosperity but when under pressure and facing the extremes of suffering.

One of our readings is Psalm 93. It begins with the confident declaration, 'The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;...your throne is established from of old.'

The Lord reigns, the Lord is king! These bold rallying cries run throughout the book of Psalms. They find their fulfilment in the New Testament in the ministry of Jesus and the message of the kingdom of God.

An alternative reading for Ascension Day comes from the book of Ephesians. This speaks of Jesus being raised from the dead and now seated at the right hand of God, 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.'

If this was all that we knew of Jesus, we might see the Christian message as one of glorious triumph in which we sit complacently with Jesus on the winning side of history.

But, of course, this is not all we know of Jesus. Among other things, this entirely bypasses the Crucifixion. And for all that the Psalms speak of the reign of God, the kingdom of David even at the height of its rule was hardly the equal of other empires at the time. Often this kingdom was not at the height of its power. It suffered many defeats culminating in the terrible pain of exile in Babylon.

In the words of the psalm, 'The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice.' And yet for all that, 'More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters...is the LORD!'

So, to declare that the Lord reigns or that Jesus is exalted above every other rule and authority is a statement which often goes against the visible reality which we see around us. Despite all that, however, we continue to stand on the truth that there remains a different, unseen and more powerful authority that we and everyone else need to reckon with.

So, experiences such as people queuing to get into church in the Ukraine are ones which are echoed in all periods of church history. The Lord reigns, Jesus is ascended and exalted are truths which mean most to us and give us most hope in the darkest times of our lives.

Not simply in the Ukraine but in many other parts of the world today, the church is experiencing extreme suffering. What is our suffering in comparison to this? However, our suffering and challenges still matter.

If I was to ask (which I do not intend to) how life is in the Deanery at the moment, I suspect that a very English answer that I might receive is 'It's difficult'. And others might wish to reply in more direct ways.

And yes, life is difficult. We cannot and we should not minimise the threats and challenges that we face. And we need to remember that these also mirror deeper themes in the wider world around us.

The polls tell us that less than half the people in this country now consider themselves to be even nominally Christian. And not simply the churches but many other voluntary organisations find it difficult to recruit enough volunteers. And that is before we begin to get onto the impact of international wars, inflation, the recovery from the covid emergency or the climate emergency.

What does it mean for us in these circumstances to say that the Lord reigns or that Jesus is exalted and ascended into heaven?

Our first question might simply be 'Where is God?' As Jesus ascends into heaven, His disciples stand rooted to the spot, staring up into heaven. In part, this is a response of bereavement and of shock. Following the crucifixion and the resurrection they have enjoyed a unique time in which Jesus has appeared to them in resurrected, bodily form. Now, however, that time is over. They can no longer see Jesus in the same way, He has been taken from their sight. Where is He and where has He gone?

And another question might be 'Who is God?' After Jesus has ascended into heaven, does this mean that He reigns there as a distant and unseen potentate, serenely detached from and above the cares of this world?

It might be tempting to think in this way. But does this do justice to the reality of who Christ is?

Who is Christ and who is God? Over the centuries, reflecting on the realities of Christ's death and resurrection, the church has developed a number of ways of thinking about this. They are all worth our study and reflection. One explanation with which we might be relatively unfamiliar is called theosis. We might be less familiar with this because it is one which is particularly prominent in the Eastern Orthodox churches.

It originates from a saying of one of the early Church Fathers, St Athanasius, 'God became man so that man might become god'.

Now straight away we may feel that we are moving on to dangerous territory. Man might become god. I once had a long conversation with someone about alternative spiritualities. My conversation partner concluded with the words 'And I am God.' I felt like responding (but did not), that must have been very

interesting for you when you were creating the world. Tell me what it was like.

To understand this phrase, we need to start with its beginning. God became man. Our Creeds contain a very succinct summary of what this means. They speak of Christ's divinity. Then they tell us that He was born, suffered, was crucified and died. After that, He descended into hell, He rose again from the dead and then ascended into heaven.

So, there is no aspect of human experience in which Jesus has not shared. Physically, He was born, suffered and died. Spiritually, He both descended into hell and ascended into heaven. So, there is nowhere we could be where Jesus has not gone before us. Even at those moments where we feel most God forsaken, Jesus has been there. And even at those moments where we feel spiritually most triumphant and exalted, Jesus is also with us. Where and who is God? He is with us in Jesus everywhere, in the best and the worst of times. What we need to do is simply to recognise this truth and respond to the reality of Jesus Christ at every level of our lives. In this way, we can indeed become as St Peter puts it, 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4).

But as we accept these truths of who and where God is, we are left with a final and very simple question, 'What shall we do?' For, our challenges and difficulties remain even though Jesus is with us in them. What are we to do in response to these challenges? We cannot simply wish them away.

We might ask this question in a different way by asking what we need to do for ourselves and what God needs to do for us.

There are two popular expressions both of which mention God. However, they answer this question in diametrically different ways.

The first is, 'Let go and let God.' In other words, it is all God's responsibility. If only we stopped trying to do things for ourselves and let God take control all will be well.

The second is 'God helps those who help themselves'. This tells us that it is all up to us to take action. If we are not prepared to do anything, God will not act for us.

These are both popular expressions. Both mention God. But neither of them can be found in the Bible. Although both expressions contain elements of truth, when we turn to the Bible, we find a more balanced and whole expression of the dividing line between God's responsibility and ours. We can turn once more to the psalms, this time to Psalm 115, 'The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.' (Psalm 115:16)

God reigns in the heavens but we are responsible for the earth. But how do we know which is which, the difference between what we need to be responsible for and what we need to leave to God? We can find some guide in how Jesus' disciples acted after the Ascension.

Immediately afterwards, the disciples just stared up into the sky. If they had remained doing this, they might have exemplified the saying just let go and let God. But there was work for them to do. They were interrupted and challenged by the two men in white robes who asked them, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?'

On the other hand, when they returned to Jerusalem they did not embark on a life of frantic action, trying to think up the latest clever scheme or strategy to spread the message of Jesus by their own efforts, thinking that God helps those who help themselves.

Rather, they responded to the message that Jesus had given them to wait in Jerusalem, to stay where they were until they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. But this waiting was to be an active rather than a passive form of waiting. They spent those next days all together constantly devoting themselves to prayer.

Pray as you can, not as you can't, the saying goes. We will each be called to pray in our own way. But as we hold onto the truth that the Lord reigns whatever our outward circumstances, what is true of the apostles is true of us. We are called neither to frantic action nor to passive resignation. We need to do what we can do and we also need to recognise what only God can do. And how do we tell the difference between the two? Well, we will find out as we remain waiting on God in prayer.