

# **Ascended into Heaven**

21 May 2023

Acts 1.6-14

Sunday after Ascension Day

1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11

Rev. Alan Keeler

John 17.1-11

## **Jesus has risen and ascended**

The heart of our Christian faith is that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven. Both of these things 'risen' and 'ascended' have more to them than meet the eye.

Our Easter faith is not just that Jesus survived after death. It is not that he was just alive again after the crucifixion. Nor is it that he is just somehow stronger than death. Our Easter faith is that Jesus was resurrected and that he was given a glorified existence that was both recognisably him but also substantially different.

The Bible records Jesus being present for 40 days and then ascending into heaven. The accounts do use language about Jesus going up. On the one hand the resurrection appearances stopped. On the other hand let's not get distracted by thinking heaven is above us and that's where Jesus went.

Jesus is risen and ascended and both of these things ought to be embraced with confidence and without embarrassment or shame. They are part of what it means to live as Christians with a strong hope and the presence of God in our lives.

## **The heavens above us**

When we lift our eyes from the earth upon which we walk, we are filled with wonder. In the daytime there can be the beauty of the blue sky, the glory of clouds and beams of sunlight. In the night time when it is clear, we see innumerable stars perhaps even meteors and a sense of the immensity of the universe in which we live.

It is quite natural to feel humbled by the heavens above us. It is quite understandable to imagine that this is where God lives.

In 1961 Yuri Gagarin was the first human to travel into space. At one point Mission Control asked him 'can you see God?' And Gagarin said 'no he couldn't'. The atheistic communists had their laugh. But for people of faith, heaven has always been far more real and exciting than a bit of space travel.

## **Heaven, the realm of God**

People of faith have always had two seemingly conflicting understandings about the presence of

God. On the one hand God is utterly different from us and he's beyond our understanding. On the other hand God is immediately present with us at all times. Heaven is the realm of God. It is both here and not here. Heaven is not first of all a place but a quality of existence and a person to be encountered.

God appears to Abram and calls him to look at the night sky. God says he will have as many descendants as the stars. God is present and explains himself in terms of the heavens.

God appears to Moses as a bush that burns but is not consumed. He tells Moses to take his shoes off because he's treading on holy ground. God is with Moses but he is also so very different.

God delivers the Hebrews from Egypt, takes them through the Red Sea and is present at Mount Sinai. God says 'do not touch the mountain or you will die'. God has powerfully looked after his people but he is also beyond their experience.

God is encountered through the law that explains how to live as true humans. But the experience is the law can't be kept.

People experience God within them so they sought to make sense of life with him. They write the books of wisdom literature. These give applications to live by, humbling reflections on human frailty and passionate songs of love. But they are all provisional as if the answer is still elusive.

And then in the fullness of time Jesus is born of a woman. He lives as a tradesman then pursues a public ministry. Jesus makes sense of life, bringing hope to the hurt and broken then finally revealing his true dignity through death and resurrection.

All of these places are the presence of God. All of these places are about heaven. They take us beyond ourselves. They show us our frailty. Here God is encountered. Here God is still encountered.

## **The glory of Ascension**

When we talk of Jesus' ascension we're not first of all interested in where this is taking place.

There are words we use about transformation that are about going up but we know they are metaphorical. When someone is given more responsibility we say 'they are promoted'. When someone has applied themselves to a skill we talk about them 'being gifted'. When someone has gone through a tough situation we will talk about

them 'having matured'. If a person is given responsibilities we will talk about them being 'over us'. With each of these we know they are still human beings. In each of these changes we know they can be encountered in the same old face to face way. But there has been transformation. Their life and our life are better because of it.

There can be a variety of words about how life is enriched. Perhaps we speak of glory or honour or majesty. All of these will be used about God and sometimes about people who are admirable.

But the particular concern Jesus had was that he would have to depart so that the Holy Spirit could be given. Jesus knew that his death, resurrection and ascension were leading to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He was entering into heaven meaning the realm of God; so that the realm of God, the Holy Spirit, could enter into us. Following Easter, on the fortieth day we celebrate Jesus ascension. On the fiftieth day we celebrate Pentecost the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.

### **Holiness**

When we describe the presence of God and the character of God the overriding word to be used is holiness. As much as God draws close to humans there is a great gulf in the quality of who he is and who we are. At its best there is inspiration, a deepening of value for what is truly human and a call to share in this divine life. It can be something that somehow frightens us and leaves us feeling shame. But that is not God's plan. In his gentleness he is merciful and wishes to establish loving relationship.

However there's an even darker side about our humanity. Those aspects of glory or honour or majesty are things that some people will grasp at any price. There can be greed, violence, dishonesty and so many other ways in which lives can be abused, destroyed or enslaved.

In our faith we talk of the Kingdom of God. It is about life that seeks all people to flourish. This sometimes means conflict with what is cruel and destructive. The greatest example of this is that Jesus was crucified. There are powers in the world that have no interest in the ways of heaven. This is not just about being secular or atheist. For there are many good people with such views. But sadly there are also people who have no scruples or pity and see their goals of glory, honour or majesty as overriding anybody else's interests.

### **Keep alert**

It is because of these realities in the world that Peter wrote the words we heard from his first letter.

Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

Matters of faith continue to have a dwindling interest in our western world. From time to time there are people who claim to have the answer. They wish to do away with all the religious stuff. But the world still has far too much poverty and suffering. There are those who look for something more than just our material world and hanker after spirituality but it can sound like an entertaining distraction.

But within Jesus death, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit, there is a reality and power to face the troubles of the world.

In that letter Peter also said:

The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

There is a popular view of heaven that it is an idyllic place waiting for us after death and the means to get there is by resurrection. That is half right. But God has always been passionate about this world. He is with us in our concerns of today. Heaven is both now and not yet.

Jesus is raised from the grave. It is a power for us now. Jesus has ascended to heaven which is the life offered to us today. Let us discipline ourselves; keep alert and pray for the kingdom of God to come.