

READING: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; John 17:6-19

SERMON : "The Ascension of our Lord"

OPENING PRAYER

With thanks and praise we shout our joy to You, O God, for You rule over all the earth from Your sacred throne. Through Moses and the prophets, You spoke to us, telling us of Christ who fills all in all. As it was written, He suffered and was killed, but You raised Him from the dead and He walked again with His chosen ones, speaking to them of Your glorious kingdom. You carried him up into heaven and seated Him at Your right hand so that He might be everywhere present, not only in this age but also in the age to come. So it is today, we gather in His name to praise and glorify You and to learn once again those things You would have us do and be, even as we remember all that You have done and yet will do.

God of the defeated and the lonely, the despised and the hungry, the misjudged and the imprisoned, the suffering and the dying, we thank You for coming

among us in Christ Jesus to reconcile and make new all of creation. We pray now for those of your children who are in need. We especially hold before you today those who are upon our hearts.

REQUESTS

Blessed be Your name, O Lord, and blessed be this time of worship. We ask all of these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.

Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank You for all the gifts You have bestowed upon us; those gifts that You give to sustain us each day and those gifts You give us for the ministry to which You call us. Receive and bless all that we offer to You now for the work of Your Kingdom. We ask it in the name of the one who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, both now and forever.

Amen.

A READING FROM ACTS 1:1-11

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach {2} until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. {3} After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. {4} On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. {5} For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." {6} So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" {7} He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. {8} But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." {9} After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. {10} They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. {11} "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been

taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

A READING FROM John 17:6-19

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. {7} Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. {8} For I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. {9} I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. {10} All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. {11} I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father protect them by the power of your name; the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. {12} While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. {13} "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. {14} I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. {15} My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. {16} They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. {17} Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. {18} As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. {19} For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

SERMON: "The Ascension Of Our Lord"

Let us pray: O Lord, You have given Your Word to be a Lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Grant us grace to receive Your truth in faith, hope and love; that we may be obedient to Your Will and

live always for Your Glory; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Did it ever strike you how a passage like those read today would be utterly unintelligible to a person who had no faith in the risen Christ? In fact, the whole faith story told in the Bible only makes sense if you believe. When you believe you find these kinds of passages, not just making sense, but warming you from the inside out.

So it is with the story of Ascension. At first it makes no sense at all.

Why in the world would this story, with its tale of Jesus, in his resurrection body being lifted bodily from the earth into heaven, recorded only by Luke, end up forming such a central part of the gospel and the creeds of the church?

How does it go in the Apostle's creed?

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

*He descended to the into Hell.
On the third day He rose again;
He ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right
hand of the Father, and He will come again to
judge the living and the dead.*

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Or, as it says in **The Book of The Acts of The Apostles:**

He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee", they said, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

This record of the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven after His death and resurrection is a strange

story to those who do not believe, one that is hard to understand. But for me, and for all of us who believe, it is a story of tremendous comfort; for it points to and completes the story of who Jesus was and is, namely the Son of The Living God. The one who came from heaven and took upon himself our flesh and who, having died for us, takes the essential part of our nature back with Him into heaven, where He, and by implication we, are made holy.

Christ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, even as He shares completely in the nature of the Father. He is there with the saints to intercede for us and to care for us until He returns in the manner He left us, upon the clouds.

The Ascension is that part of the story of Christ Jesus that allows us to say that where two or more are gathered in His name, there He is.

The Ascension is that part of the gospel that allows us to say that unto Jesus, every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

The Ascension preserves, and indeed helps to create what we call the Trinitarian mystery; namely that God is both three and one.

He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

Our Jesus, our Saviour, did not simply fade away like some breath on the wind after the resurrection.

His form, His substance, His identity, are instead made one with the Father's and yet remain unique; much as we believe our form, our substance, our identity, will also, in a similar manner become one with the Father and yet remain unique.

It is a marvellous tale; this tale of the Ascension when you believe.

It assures us of the integrity of the story and of our own future within it.

If the story of the ascension is hard for unbelievers to read and understand, then the gospel passage today is even more so. For here we have recorded a portion of prayer of Jesus on the night of His betrayal; that section which is often labelled in

modern editions of the Bible: "Jesus Prays For His Disciples".

Its talk of being in the world, but not of the world, is confusing to those outside of the church. So too is the talk about how Jesus and the Father share all things both in this world and in the next including us. So much so, it can obscure the message that Jesus is giving his followers even as He prays to the Father for them and about them.

If you read the passage a couple of times as a believer however, two things pop out. One is that Jesus is worried about the rag-tag group of followers He is leaving behind. (His concerns are well founded).

The second thing is that Jesus is grateful to God that He has these followers (including you and I).

Jesus prays for the disciples and for us, knowing what difficulties they will have to face. He reminds them and us that we have been called and consecrated or, to use the word most commonly used in the translation of this passage, sanctified.

In the Hebrew tradition, to be consecrated meant to be set apart for a specific purpose. Things were set apart for use in the Temple, but more importantly, people were set apart to do God's work.

To be set apart means that we do not go into protective hiding, but that we realize we have been called and are to be agents of God in the world. We are sanctified or consecrated in truth.

This sense of being consecrated was a repetitious theme of the prophets as well. The People of God were consecrated, a chosen people. They were not to gloat and feel privileged but had a responsibility. They, and we as Jesus' community, must live out the responsibility of that call, that "consecration in truth". We are called to work for justice, peace, love and ethical behaviour in the world. The forces against us belong to "the world" that Jesus mentions in his prayer, and knowing the power of "the world", he is praying for us as we go out to bring his message.

It is evident from Jesus' words that he has planted something in us that gives us a different vision, a

different way of being and acting. He has planted in us a Word that He has received from His Father. It causes us to see things in another light, to evaluate ourselves and others by Another's standard; a standard of love.

Therefore, the talk of being in the world, but not of the world serves to identify us more fully with Him, who himself was in the world but not of the world. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to pull out of this world and start a new nation on some distant island. If that was the plan for us, He would have said so. Rather he sends us equipped to go into the world and make a difference, and to do so as one who is not of this world, but rather is "consecrated in truth".

What does it mean to be in the world but not of the world?

The struggles of Northern Ireland have long contained stories of offenses of one side against another and then reprisals for the offenses. An Irish Methodist minister, Cheryl Jane Walter, tells a story that exemplifies being "in the world but not of it".

A bombing of civilians in the town of Ennishillen, Northern Ireland in 1987, killed many civilians. The IRA claimed responsibility, leaving no doubt of the perpetrators. A 20-year-old student nurse Marie Wilson was trapped in the rubble with her father, Gordan. She asked him if he was all right, and clutching his hand said her last words, "Daddy, I love you very much." She was removed from the rubble, but later died in the hospital. Gordan Wilson grieved for his 20-year-old daughter, yet he said he felt no ill will. Indeed, he said he would pray for the people who planted the bomb. Normally reprisals are the response to such an act. Gordan Wilson's words of forgiveness defused the community's anger.

Isn't that what it means to be in the world but not of it? And isn't that what it means to be "consecrated to truth" and, as Jesus prays in the opening of the prayer, protected by God's Holy Name?

It doesn't make sense, unless you believe. But **then** it does.

And so does the Ascension. It makes clear just who and what we have in Christ Jesus.

We have the story not only of God taking on flesh and coming among us, in this world but not of it, fully human, fully one of us. But we also have that human one taking our nature with Him back to God, being there, ruling, being everywhere.

It is the completion of the story, the giving of the Holy Spirit.

As it is found in the prayer of Jesus.

I will remain in the world no longer, but I am coming to you.

Because Jesus is glorified and lifted up to God, because He is ascended into heaven, He is able to be with us now, because He has been sanctified, He can sanctify us.

His prayer for us is heard.

We need to not look up and wonder where He is, for by His going, He is able to come.

What we are to do, is to open ourselves to the Spirit. Listen to the word that God has given us, and go out into the world, and do what we are to do, knowing

that God will protect us and bring us safe to his side when our work and witness is done.

AMEN

LET US PRAY

Almighty God, Your Son Jesus promised that if He was lifted up, He would draw all to Himself. Draw us to Him by faith, so that we may live to serve You and look toward life eternal.

Loving and Compassionate God, your Son our Saviour is with you in eternal glory. Give us faith to see that, true to His promise, He is among us still, and will be with us to the end of time. God of the humble and homeless, the poor and the persecuted, thank You for exalting Christ Jesus and giving Him a name above all other names. Today we rejoice that He who was the meekest and weakest of all earth's children is at Your right hand. Now we know that the homeless Son of man is more truly at home than anyone else on earth. We thank You for the glory You have granted Him, and we remember before You now those who, like He was, are the

least among us; the homeless in our world; the refugees and the poor; the victims of war and the little ones who have been left alone.

Grant, O God, that they may know Your love in this world.

Eternal Father, Your Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that He might rule over all things as Lord. Keep the church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of His peace that we might show the world the light You want them to see.

Bless us here at Knox and indeed all your people with vision and faith, obedience, and joy. We ask it in Jesus' name. **Amen**

BENEDICTION

Go in peace, love and care for one another in the name of Christ;

May the tender and nurturing hands of God, embrace you.

The farseeing eyes of God watch over you.

The breath of God sustain you, and the prayers of the Risen Christ protect you both now and

forevermore. **Amen**

