

I believe in... The Ascension and Session

Sunday, 1st May, 2011

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; Nicene Creed

We are doing a short series looking at key beliefs within Christianity and how they affect our lives.

I said at the beginning of this series that our aim is not that we know more stuff at the end of this; but rather that our lives are changed so that whether we are going through good times or tough times, we know what we can hold onto; so that our foundations are built on solid Rock of faith.

Last week I spoke about the Resurrection and some of its implications for us and how once the devoted disciples got hold of the Truth about the Resurrection and 'believed' they were led to worship.

Someone put it like this – lots of people believe in the Jesus of the **Manger** – God's Gift to mankind – "Goodwill to all men on whom His favour rests"; God with us.

Many people look at the perfect **life** and example and teaching of Jesus – the Man, and are inspired and follow Him.

Some people look to the **Cross** and find the Saviour – the Lamb of God, dying in our place.

Others, as we saw last week find the **Empty Tomb** and the Risen One – and worship

But there is more that we can look at if we want to have a fuller picture of who Jesus is and know Him more; the Resurrection is not the end of the Story – and today I want to look at what comes next – the **Ascension** and where Jesus is now, and what He is doing.

And if we can fix our eyes there, we see King Jesus ruling and reigning with all authority and power, with all things under His Control.

And if we see this, then we can know amazing peace and joy – even through the hardest of trials.

I want us to look at some of the passages in the Bible that talk about this, starting with the passage in Luke 24.

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:50-53)

This had been such an intense emotional time for the Disciples; they had gone with Jesus to Jerusalem, apprehensive about what would happen.

And then their worst fears were realised – Jesus was arrested, tried and sentenced to death, while they had scattered.

Then from a distance, they had watched as Jesus was crucified and died – Jesus, their friend, the One who they had come to know as the Messiah – the One they had put their hope in, was gone and their hope was broken.

But then, a few days later, Mary, then John and some others had come in, stumbling over their words – breathless with excitement, trying to explain that He wasn't dead any more – He was alive and He was who He said He was!

And then there He was with them – and they saw Him and they heard Him and they touched Him and ate with Him and they KNEW He had risen – just as He had said He would. And they believed.

And then – a few weeks later, just as they were coming to terms with the fact that Jesus was back with them, He led them out to the Mount of Olives – one of His favourite places, where He had spent lots of time with them – possibly even to the place where a few weeks before He had been sweating drops of blood as He had faced the Cross; And He had left them – ascending to Heaven.

You might think that the Disciples would be devastated that once again He was leaving them – but they weren't:

Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

As they saw the Ascension, they weren't saddened – they rejoiced and worshipped.

And I believe that as we fix our eyes on the Ascension, just like the Disciples did, we find joy.

So let's have a closer look at what the Disciples saw and what happened and what it means.

Some of us may have seen a wedding this week – (the Royal Wedding) and if you watched it on TV, you may have seen it happening from lots of different camera angles and slow motion and action replay; Although the Ascension was infinitely more important, all the Gospels say is "He left them and was taken up into Heaven"

Acts adds a bit more detail, but it is still left for us to imagine a lot of what the Disciples saw.

This is Luke's account from Acts:

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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."

(In other words, "Are You going to restore the Kingdom? – "No, you are!")

After he said this, 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." (Acts 1:6-11)

There was something in this 'going' of Jesus that was different – it was clear to them that this time He was not going to reappear – at least anytime soon.

This time He was hidden in a Cloud – and some of them had seen this Cloud before – at the Transfiguration when the bright cloud enveloped them and they heard God saying "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

This was the same Cloud that led the Israelites through the desert, and would descend on the Tent of Meeting where Moses met with God; it was the same Cloud that filled the Temple when Solomon dedicated it (2 Chronicles 6:13-14)

In Matthew 28, giving the great Commission, Jesus said that all authority had been given to Him.

What the Disciples were witnessing in the Ascension was the giving of this authority – this was God the Father lifting up His Son:

In Philippians 2 it says this:

(Jesus) humbled himself
and became **obedient to death--**
even **death on a cross!**

Therefore God **exalted** him to the **highest place**
and gave him the name that is **above** every name,

that at the name of Jesus **every knee should bow,**
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and **every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,**
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

What this is all describing is what is known as the Exaltation of Christ; Jesus made Himself nothing – humbled Himself – became obedient to death → so God exalted Him.

The disciples had seen His resurrection; now this – the Ascension.

What happened next was that Jesus was seated in the Highest Place - at God's Right Hand.

This is sometimes called **the Session of Christ** (Session means to be sitting)

This is important for two reasons;

1. Firstly, it is **The place of authority** – it is the demonstration that all authority has been given to Him.

And that should fill us with joy because it means that He is in control – through good and bad times, He is still on His Throne – and one day ALL things will bow to Him there – even His enemies.

It means that His Triumph over all things – sin, sickness, evil, death, false gods and other religions, all nations, principalities, powers, kings, governments, angels demons – EVERYTHING; His Triumph is secure and guaranteed; EVERYTHING will bow down to Him.

During the worst time in my life – after being in a horrible, devastation car crash, it was this Truth that I clung to – that Jesus is Sovereign – He is in control and all authority is His.

And through the other big challenging time in my life – moving to plant the Crown, again, it was this Truth that I clung to – that Jesus has all authority, and in that authority, He has sent us into all the world – even Birmingham!

When hard times come, there are only two ways we can look as Christians; up or down.

We need to be people with our heads up – focused on Jesus, seated at the Right Hand of God, because otherwise we'll be looking down – at our circumstances and going under despair.

2. Secondly, Jesus sitting at the Right Hand of the Father is important because it talks about Jesus' **completed work**.

Sitting down was an important symbol in Jewish culture – in some places it still is today; if you had to go to court, the Judge would sit down and the court would be 'in session'; then your lawyer would give evidence or question a witness, and then, once they had finished, they would sit down – and the act of sitting down would show that they had finished.

It says this in Hebrews:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when

this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:11-14)

Why did the priest stand to do their duties? Because the sacrifices they were offering were for the sins committed, but they weren't enough to conquer sin – so the priest had to make sacrifices day after day, month after month, year after year, century after century – they were never finished, so the priests could never sit down.

But then another Priest – our Great High Priest – Jesus came – and He wasn't only Priest – He was also the Perfect, complete, once-for-all Sacrifice – the Lamb of God.

And He offered Himself to face death on the Cross – and once this Perfect, fully sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice was made.

And then He did what no other priest had ever done – He sat down.

The fact that today Jesus is sitting at the Right Hand of God is testimony to the Work that He has done on the Cross – it is perfect; it is sufficient; nothing else needs to be added to it.

When I decorate a room, I paint, put up wallpaper, tidy up – then sit down to admire what I've done...then I notice a bit of paper that needs glueing down, or a bit of paint I've missed – so I get up and do a bit more – then sit down again. I keep getting up again because my work isn't perfect!

He doesn't need to keep getting up again to do a bit more work, because His Work is perfect – His Sacrifice was complete and is fully acceptable to His Father.

On the Cross Jesus cried out "It is finished!"

Jesus sitting at God's Right Hand demonstrates it for Eternity.

So when we sin and fail and it doesn't really feel like we are saved or forgiven, we need to look at Him!

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there

Who made an end to all my sin!

I have several books about Spiritual Disciplines; one very important discipline is where we fix our eyes. Sometimes we don't feel like Jesus is in control as things seem to go wrong and life is hard – but if we remember where Jesus is now and fix our eyes on Him then it changes us.

Times when I have done this have made such a difference to me – there is such amazing peace from knowing that Jesus really is in control – He is Sovereign;

There are a few times in my life when everything around me has been going crazy and I've not been coping; then I have fought to get my eyes on Jesus Enthroned at the Right Hand of God – sometimes it has taken days of struggling to focus my eyes on Him. But when I have, I have known God's Peace that passes understanding, right in the middle of whatever crisis or circumstances I have been in, and it has changed me.

If we lack God's Peace it's not because life is hard, it's because we're short sighted – we need to look up!

Jesus has been exalted to the Highest Place and sits at God's Right Hand in the Place of all authority.

He has been given the Name that is above every name

One day all His enemies will be placed under His Feet and every knee will bow – in heaven and on Earth and under the Earth, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord

A final reason why the Ascension is important is that out of this supreme Authority, just before He ascended, **we were commissioned** (given a job to do and authority to do it)

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...therefore go...Be My witnesses.”

John Stott says this:

- Jesus goes so the Holy Spirit can come
- The Holy Spirit comes in order that we go
- And we go in order that Jesus will come again.

The two “Men dressed in white” – the angels asked the question "why do you stand here looking into the sky?"

Even though the Disciples had just witnessed a unique event – Jesus rising to Heaven, the angels ask “Why are you looking up into the sky?” almost with a sense of “Stop wasting time looking up there when you have work to do! Don’t dwell on this – don’t grieve; this is a time full of joy because now the Church is going to be established; the Kingdom is extending! There are nations to reach!”

And the final thing the angels said is that once the Gospel has gone to the ends of the Earth, *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.*" (Acts 1:11)

We’ll speak on this in a few weeks time.

Pray.