

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

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 7 November 2022, 22nd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 110, Ephesians 1:15-23; Acts 1:1-11

The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

Psalm 110:1

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 1 Corinthians 15:25

The Age of Anxiety

Last week I admitted that I'm a bit of a Taylor Swift fan. One of my other favourite bands is Arcade Fire. The opening track on their latest album is called the Age of Anxiety. We live in an age of anxiety. The world feels much more uncertain than it was 3 years ago. The pandemic. Polarisation in US politics. The rise of China. The war in Ukraine. Unstable weather. The song has more in mind lives lived on social media where people are acutely conscious of how people see them and so have to curate a photoshopped image with all the right virtue signals. But Social media only exacerbates the fears we have about what others think about us. We can be worried too about the future of the church. The census shows a decline of those identifying as Christians. If you break down those figures into different denominations, Anglicans and Catholics are haemorrhaging numbers. The public square seems increasingly hostile. We're few in number here at St George's. We face lots of challenges, not least financial. The world, the church, ourselves. There is a lot we could be anxious about.

We're continuing our series on the Apostles Creed, a tour of this ancient summary of the Christian faith and how it can anchor our lives today. Or rather, how the God of whom it speaks, who has come to us in the person of his Son and who is with us by his Spirit anchors our lives as we worship him. Today we come to the lines, *He [that is Jesus] ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.* We're looking at Jesus' ascension and what theologians call his heavenly session, which is just an old way of saying his sitting at the right hand of the Father. That Jesus has ascended and is sitting at the Father's right hand is the antidote to our anxieties. All of us, Christian or not, have our own fears and anxieties. My hope and prayer is that as we grasp the truth of Jesus' ascension and heavenly session each of us will move from fear to faith. We're going to look at 3 points: Absence and faith, Embodied hope, Sovereign Rule. So let's have a look together.

Absence and Faith.

When Thomas saw the holes in Jesus' hands and side he worshipped him. Jesus said to him, "Because you've seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹ This is our experience as believers. We believe in Jesus, and yet he is not physically present with us. We

¹ John 20.29

cannot touch him. For 40 days after his resurrection he met with his disciples, but then he ascended into heaven. And this means that the Christian faith is just that - faith. "We walk by faith and not by sight," as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians.² Now, there are all sorts of good reasons for trusting in Christ even though we cannot see him. There's historical evidence. There is the witness of the Bible. There is the church, where we see his power at work in the lives of others. There are the sacraments, physical tokens of his love for us, pregnant with all the meaning given in Scripture. There's our own experience, where we have seen at work in our lives. We recall Augustine's words, that without trust, "we'd be unable to do anything in this life."³ Trust, faith, is the very stuff of relationships. We believe the word of others. We believe God's word. But it is still faith.

We only know Jesus in his absence. That means that there is an incompleteness in our experience. Paul says that when we see Christ, then we will know fully, even as we are fully known.⁴ We long to see him and be with him. Peter writes,

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, **9** for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The ascension reminds us that the experience of the Christian life is one of faith and hope. Faith in Christ whom we cannot see, and hope that we will one day see him. We should not expect to find ourselves entirely comfortable and satisfied in this life. We're in grave spiritual danger if we do! Faith and hope are virtues we need to cultivate to combat anxiety. And they point outside of ourselves - to the one who has ascended. And this brings us to point 2, embodied hope.

Embodied Hope

One of the criticisms thrown at Christianity is that it's anti the body - repressive and harmful. But this could not be further from the truth. The highest affirmation of the body however is the person of Christ himself. His bodily incarnation, bodily suffering, bodily death, bodily resurrection and bodily ascension. The good news of Jesus does not say the body is evil and the spirit is what really matters. No, it is about the redemption and transformation of the whole of human life including bodily life. The Son did not reject human nature but united himself to human nature in order to unite us to God.⁵

Christ you see is still human. And he is at his Father's right hand. Hebrews picks up that strange verse from Psalm 110 - *The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: / 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.'*⁶ - and sees it fulfilled in Jesus. He is our high priest. Because he was made like us he is able to sympathise with us in our weakness.⁷ Because he lives forever, he eternally intercedes for us

² 2 Corinthians 5.7

³ Quoted in Ben Myers, *The Apostles Creed*, Lexham, 2018:14

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁵ Myers, *The Apostles Creed*, 88

⁶ PSalm 110.4

⁷ Hebrews 4.15

before God.⁸ Through his mediation we have access to the throne room of God.⁹ He is the bridge between our fallen world and heaven. In him humanity is seated at the right hand of God.

In baptism we are united to Christ through faith, such that where he is, there we are. So Paul can say in Colossians,

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. **3** For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.¹⁰

This is why we begin communion with the words, “Lift up your hearts / we lift them to the Lord.” Because we are lifting our hearts from the horizon of our own anxieties and fears to our Lord who has ascended and ever lives to intercede for us, in whom our lives are hidden, safe and secure.

Sovereign Rule

Do you know which verse from the Old Testament is quoted the most in the New Testament? It’s from our first reading, Psalm 110:1:

The Lord says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

The apostle Peter sets the tone when he uses this verse to conclude his sermon explaining what God has done in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. **33** Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. **34** For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:

‘Sit at my right hand

35 until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”¹¹

What then does it mean for Jesus to sit at the right hand of God? Peter here says that it means that Jesus is both Lord and Messiah. Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of the Father is his ultimate vindication as God’s chosen king, the king of all creation. It is through Christ that the Father exercises his sovereign rule over creation. And so we read in Ephesians that God has raised Christ from the dead,

and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, **21** far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. **22** And, [notice the language of Psalm 110 again], God placed all things under his feet ...¹²

⁸ Hebrews 7.25

⁹ Hebrews 4.16; 10.19-22

¹⁰ Colossians 3.1-3.

¹¹ Acts 2:32-36

¹² Ephesians 1:20-22

That Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father means that he has power and authority above all other things. He is the Sovereign Lord. All things are subject to his authority. He has no rivals.

In 1 Corinthians Paul expands on this saying, “he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”¹³ Have you ever wondered what Jesus is doing now? This is the answer: he is reigning until he has put all his enemies under his feet. At present we do see Christ’s enemies at work. Sickness, disease, death. Famine, flood, fire. War, oppression, violence. People and nations in rebellion against him. This is why we pray, “Hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In his sovereign freedom he grants a dependent freedom to his creation, sustaining and upholding all things, even as so much wars against him. This is the mystery of God’s providential care, exercised through his exalted Son. And yet there is a direction in which history and all creation is moving towards - when everything bows before Christ and acknowledges him as Lord. As we read in Colossians, “all things are made through him and for him”, and through his blood shed on the cross all things are reconciled to God.¹⁴

This means nothing and no one is outside of his sovereign rule. Not Covid. Not the war in Ukraine. Not climate change. Not your job. Not your family. Not your friends. Not your future. Not tragedy or triumph. He is the one who is in control, not you. And so you can trust him with all these things. Yes, there is a mystery in this. We don’t understand why things happen. But we are not the ones on the throne. Jesus is. And what’s more, it’s the Jesus who suffered and died and rose again for us, who is on the throne. So we can trust him because he is good and he loves us. Jesus’ ascension and heavenly session is of sublime comfort to us, because it means we are not in charge and the future is not in our hands, it’s in his love-scarred hands.

Things are even better for the church. Did you see it there, tucked away at the end of our reading from Ephesians?

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything **for the church**, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.¹⁵

Christ’s sovereign rule is *for the church!* I find this astonishing. The Church is the body of Christ, and therefore his reign is for his body even as it is for himself. His sovereign rule over every part of creation is for the church. So the future of his Church is secure! At the very least this should give us extraordinary confidence for the future of the Church, even here at St George’s. So we can endure opposition and a hostile public square. We need not be discouraged. What’s more, he will provide. Do we have a financial need? We need not be anxious. We need only ask. He will provide. Do we have a personnel need? We need not be anxious. We need only ask. He will provide. He did yesterday. He will tomorrow. My goodness we got a \$1.6 million Christmas present from the federal government in

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15.25. Cf. Psalm 110:2: *The Lord will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion, saying, ‘Rule in the midst of your enemies!’*

¹⁴ Colossians 1.16, 20

¹⁵ Ephesians 1.22-23

2018! And if we are anxious, a good question to ask is, what am I looking to provide other than Christ?

Christ our ascended king has given his church a mission. In Acts we read that it was to be his witnesses, to the ends of the earth - even to Tasmania. Matthew's Gospel puts it in different language. Jesus commands us to go and make disciples. How is that done? Through baptising, and teaching people to obey everything Christ has commanded. Sacrament and Word. This is how Christ's kingdom grows - as people bend their knee to him as King. So the ascension reminds us of our central task as the church: making disciples. Our ascended king empowers us for this task as he gives his Spirit.

Paul knows our anxieties. And that is why he prays 2 things for the Ephesians Christians and for us. He prays that we would know God's hope and power in Christ. Did you see there in verse 18?

18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know **the hope** to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, **19** and **his incomparably great power** for us who believe.

What is that incomparably great power? The same mighty strength by which he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand. If it is that power by which he put Christ on his heavenly throne where he sits far above every other power, then that is truly great power indeed. In fact it is none other than the Holy Spirit. He is God's power at work in us! More on the Spirit next week. For the moment, what a tremendous prayer to pray. That the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened that we may know God's hope and power in our lives, the hope and power of the ascended and reigning king.

There is a paradox in Jesus' ascension. Yes, it means Jesus is physically absent. But on the other hand his ascension is his public enthronement over all creation, and his sovereign presence reigns throughout creation. Paul writes, he "fills everything in every way."¹⁶ In his absence he is closer than our very breath. Are you anxious, worried about what others think of you, worried about your future, worried about those who love? Lift your eyes to the ascended king, seated at the right hand of the Father, closer than a brother. See his majesty and power. Give your worries to him in prayer. He is the one who can put this world right, who can put your life right. Ask him to grant you his peace and empower you for his service.

¹⁶ Ephesians 1.23