

Acts 1:9

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Of all the events concerning the life of the Lord Jesus

- The ascension is the most neglected
- The incarnation of Jesus is an important Christian doctrine
- Christmas is a major festival and even the world at large celebrates it
- The death of Jesus and his work on the cross is central to Christianity
- Good Friday is a Bank Holiday
- The resurrection of Jesus is something Christians celebrate every Sunday
- But especially on Easter Day
- But the ascension of the Lord Jesus is given little attention
- And most people do not think much about it on ascension day or any other day

To gain some help on the ascension of the Lord Jesus

- I thought I would enlist the help of Professor Alister McGrath
- And consult his important work *An Introduction to Christian Theology*
- The index directed me to several pages about the incarnation
- To references about the cross and much theological discussion about the resurrection
- But there was no pointer to ascension in the index – no help there then
- And yet, Luke, the evangelist who wrote both the gospel bearing his name and Acts
- Intending them to be parts one and two of the same work (Luke-Acts)
- Mentions the ascension both at the end of the gospel and at the beginning of Acts
- And, therefore, it is important that we give it due consideration

The first observation on the story is that it is difficult to imagine

- But then, when you think about it, most miraculous things are difficult to imagine
- How did Jesus multiply the five loaves and the two small fish?
- How did the risen Jesus appear suddenly to the disciples at various times?
- The somewhat sceptical commentator, Ernst Haenchen, says of the ascension account
- It is ‘unsentimental, almost uncannily austere’
- To which, I suppose, the reply could be made
- That a characteristic of the accounts of Jesus is that they are unsentimental
- Completely lacking in extravagant detail that accompanies myths and legends

The double emphasis that Luke gives to the ascension of Jesus

- is placed right alongside the commission to be his witnesses
- in Luke’s gospel, Jesus commands them to be witnesses and to wait for the Spirit
- in Acts, Jesus commands them to be witness and to wait for the Spirit
- but in both accounts this is done in the context of his resurrection and ascension
- Luke’s point is that the church’s mission rests
- not only on the resurrection of Jesus
- But also upon his living presence in heaven
- the sure promise of his return
- And his saving power

In other words:

- I MISSION IS ABOUT A LIVING LORD
- II MISSION IS ABOUT AN ASCENDED LORD
- III MISSION IS ABOUT A RETURNING LORD
- IV MISSION IS ABOUT A SAVING LORD

I MISSION IS ABOUT A LIVING LORD

One of the challenges that the apostles had to face was what to do about the twelfth man

- Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, had later committed suicide
- Probably by hanging himself and eventually swelling up so his intestines spilled out
- This happened in the Field of Blood that had been bought with the 30 pieces of silver
- The twelve apostles were clearly appointed in parallel to the twelve tribes of Israel
- So it was necessary to appoint another leader of the new community of the church
- A new community could be founded by 120 people
- Which is probably why Luke mentions that number
- From that new community a new apostle would have to be appointed
- The qualifications of such an apostle are clear
- To have been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry (his baptism)
- To the time of his ascension – the reason being clearly spelled out
- ‘for one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection’ (Acts 1:22)

In his great chapter about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul spells out the message:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

(1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

The very essence of apostleship is to have seen the risen Lord Jesus Christ

- Paul says that by his extraordinary encounter with the Lord
- He became the last of those to see the risen Christ
- And therefore gained an extraordinary apostleship, testifying to his resurrection
- In the strictly New Testament sense the title ‘apostle’
- Belongs only to the first generation of Christians
- And is not an appropriate title for a Christian leader or missionary today
- The very essence of apostleship is to bear testimony
- Paul has obviously received a profound Christian education
- But there are some things that he regards as being ‘of first importance’
- Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures
- He was buried (some people think this insignificant – but he was *really* dead)
- He was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures
- He appeared, to Peter, Twelve, to more than 500, to James and the apostles, to Paul

Recently, a friend from another denomination paid me a great compliment

- He did not know that it was a great compliment
- To someone for whom being Christian, evangelical and Methodist (in that order)
- Is important
- Christian – affirming the Lordship and deity of Christ by trust and obedience
- Evangelical – has recently been defined to have an emphasis on four things
- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be changed
- Activism: the expression of the gospel in effort
- Biblicism: a particular regard for the Bible
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross
- And it is fair to say that each of those four is important to me
- But my friend was unwittingly paying me a compliment as a Methodist
- Though a fellow Christian, and fellow evangelical
- He doesn't know much about Methodists but complimenting me on my work
- With those with whom I did not always agree, he said, you have a 'Catholic spirit'
- John Wesley preached a famous sermon on the *Catholic Spirit*
- Pointing out that Christians some times disagreed on matters of opinion
- Such as forms of church government, forms of prayer
- Kneeling or standing for communion, the manner of administering baptism and so on
- But this is not to say that anything goes or that some doctrines are negotiable
- In this list of non-negotiable doctrines, Wesley included, belief in God
- the deity of Christ, original sin, the atonement, including Christ dying as substitute
- Justification by faith alone, the new birth and the work of the Holy Spirit
- He affirmed the value of scripture and the importance of Christian morality
- His doctrine was salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, followed by holiness
- Of course, Christians can and do disagree – but the essentials must hold firm
- Paul expresses this in his phrase 'of first importance'
- Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised, he appeared
- To say anything other is to weaken the very fundamentals of the faith
- And the mission of the church for mission is about a living Lord

II MISSION IS ABOUT AN ASCENDED LORD

Luke uses a single Greek verb which NIV renders 'he was taken up'

- It is important to note that this is unlikely to have been his first ascension
- But it was certainly his last
- When Jesus appeared to Mary he told her he had not yet ascended to the Father
- And yet it seems unlikely that he should say she could not cling on to him
- If he was going to be round and about for the next forty days
- It seems much safer to conclude that Jesus ascended to his Father
- Very soon after his resurrection, appearing to his disciples on several occasions
- Verifying the truth of his resurrection, before ascending to glory for the last time
- Here Jesus is ascending on high, not fetched away as Elijah, with chariot of fire
- But rising to heaven, as he rose from the grave, by his own power
- His body being, after the resurrection
- A spiritual body raised in power

However difficult it is to imagine and it is undoubtedly difficult

- There is no doubt that Luke had a specific historical event in mind
- That said, Luke is most interested in the significance of the ascension

The world of science fiction has conjured up the idea of travel both in space and time

- If the new series of *Dr Who* is anything like the previous ones
- Space and time travel become possible through the 'tardis'
- While in *Star Trek* space and time travel are possible through the 'transporter'
- The very existence of space and time at least opens the possibility
- That there is an existence outside of space and time
- For the Christian this is heaven, the dwelling place of God, outside of space and time

The contention that Luke is committed to a pre-Copernican understanding of things

- In that he is committed to heaven being above the bright blue sky is quite wrong
- Though on the other hand, the scriptures are rarely written in philosophical concepts
- So visualising the heaven as above the here and now is understandable
- Space exploration has brought the universe outside of the earth's atmosphere
- Into the realm of the here and now but need not rule out the possibility of heaven

The apostles were witnesses to the ascension of the Lord Jesus

- As much as they were to his death and resurrection
- They were committed to tell what they had seen and heard
- His death upon the cross, the place of his burial, the empty tomb, the appearing Lord
- But their experience was not confined to the historical facts of Jesus' life
- But extended to his transforming grace in the life of the believer
- It is not at all surprising to me that a denial of the historical facts of his life
- Are often followed by a denial of the power of his transforming grace
- So that, even within the wider Christian community
- There are some people who find it as hard to cope with the historical events
- As they do with Paul's great claim in 1 Corinthians

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

In the life of the Christian community we face huge challenges to the traditional morality

- The contention being that some people are made a particular way and cannot change
- But this is not the teaching of the New Testament
- At Corinth, the culture where the Christians lived was the Temple of Aphrodite
- Into the Christian church came people with all kinds of backgrounds and experiences
- But they had experienced the transforming grace of God, through faith in Jesus
- Paul lists a variety of sins and sinners and exclaims 'that is what some of you were'

The ascended Lord has gone into heaven to minister as priest, by his own blood

- To pray for sinners and to prepare a place for those who will be saved
- This, of course, is the heavenly reality of which the tabernacle and temple
- Were the earthly counterpart
- When the earthly high priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice on the mercy seat
- In the holy of holies, the glory of God appeared in a cloud (*shekinah*)
- As Jesus ascended into the heavenly holy of holies
- He was caught up in the enveloping glory of God (cf Exodus 40:34)
- As the Psalmist says, 'he made the clouds his chariot' (Psalm 104:3)
- The cloud at his transfiguration was a visible sign of God's presence and approval
- So the cloud at his ascension marks God's presence and approval

It is really not awfully surprising that the apostles are left gazing towards the sky

- Perhaps they were waiting for Jesus still to be there when the cloud had gone
- After all, that is what had happened at his transfiguration
- Perhaps they were hoping that Jesus would come back again in moments
- To restore the kingdom to Israel
- Nevertheless, there is something inconsistent with gazing into the sky
- When they had been commissioned to tell the good news to the ends of the earth
- Now wonder then, that two angelic witness
- (two being the minimum number required to give valid evidence)
- told them that 'this same Jesus who has gone into heaven will come back'

Mission is about a risen Lord

Mission is about an ascended Lord

III MISSION IS ABOUT A RETURNING LORD

The angelic spokesmen repeat that Jesus is now into heaven

- it was possible for him to go
- it is possible for him to return
- Jesus had told the disciples that they would see heaven opened (John 1:51)
- The angels addressed the apostles as 'men of Galilee'
- They must remember that they are men, earthen vessels, sinners
- But Jesus is not only a man but now raised, immortal, entering the Father's presence
- He is gone up with a shout and the sound of a trumpet (Psalm 47:5)
- He will descend with trumpet call of God (1 Thessalonians 4:16)
- In the same way that he has ascended, so he will descend, on a cloud of glory
- With great power and authority (Luke 21:27)
- This was the very thing of which Jesus had spoken that enraged the high priest
- When he replied to Caiaphas at his trial

I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.

(Matthew 26:64)

Some people are as sceptical about this as they are about the ascension

- But in their scepticism fail to answer questions such as ‘where is Jesus now?’
- ‘What is Jesus doing now?’
- Where is Jesus now? In heaven
- What is Jesus doing now? Praying and preparing for his people

Mission is about a risen Lord

Mission is about an ascended Lord

Mission is about a returning Lord

IV MISSION IS ABOUT A SAVING LORD

It is important that we do not simply rehearse the truth about the Lord Jesus

- The risen Lord, the ascended Lord, the returning Lord
- Only to greet this news with a so-what kind of shrug
- For mission is about a saving Lord

The witnesses are called upon to bear good news to Jesus, good news of a Saviour

- As this book of Acts unfolds, Luke will often record in careful detail
- What these witnesses said about Jesus
- This can be distilled into what the theologian calls the *kreygma* or kernel of truth
- Jesus was the promised Saviour
- The death of Jesus was part of God’s plan
- God raised him from the dead as he promised
- The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is glorified now and for ever
- All must repent and believe in him

Many people are willing to say, ‘well 2,000 years have passed so why should we worry’

- But is it not the case that the longer things have gone on the more urgent we should be
- This applies in the world and it applies in our own individual lives
- In the world, can anyone seriously say that we are in less need of Jesus today
- Than at anytime in our history?
- Not every believer is called upon to be a preacher but we are all witnesses
- We tell others of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus
- We tell of the transforming grace of God in our lives and our hope in Jesus
- And our belief that he is coming again and that we shall be with him for ever
- This is the gospel – the good news and it is all about Jesus

When I am at football on Saturday afternoons, the longer the game goes on

- The more frantic the players become in an endeavour to score
- Therefore, as we have been engaged in this work for 2,000 years
- Now is not the time to be slowing up in proclaiming the good news
- An older friend of mine, George Duncan, described his rising years as injury time
- I reminded him, ‘A great proportion of winning goals are scored in injury time’
- But we are not about scoring goals but winning souls – souls for Jesus
- Our risen Lord, our ascended Lord, our returning Lord, our saving Lord