

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The text for today's sermon is the Gospel reading and I will just read again verses 50 to 52.

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 worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Have you heard the saying "what goes up must come down"? It is a scientific fact that due to the force of gravity any item that goes up comes down again unless it goes up with a velocity sufficiently strong enough to overcome the force of gravity. To overcome earth's gravity the speed needed is just over 40,000 kph any less and the object will fall back to earth.

But our text today seems to put pay to that saying. Jesus came down from heaven, was born in Bethlehem and now having completed his saving work, he goes up into heaven and he is still there sitting at the right-hand side of the Father. Our reading from Ephesians this morning gave a wonderful picture of Jesus in his glory. He has promised that he will return again to earth on the last day in glory when all people everywhere will acknowledge him as Lord.

While we are not told at what speed Jesus ascended, we can be fairly certain it was not at 40,000 kph or faster! So, in his ascension Jesus demonstrates, his mastery over the universe – he has mastery over the laws of nature and physics and through his death and resurrection he also demonstrates his mastery over sin, death and the power of the devil!

So why did Jesus ascend to heaven? Was it simply that his earthly mission was complete and now he could return to his glory and simply leave everything to the Holy Spirit?

To answer that question let's start by looking at some of the context of reading. Our text today includes the final verses of Luke's Gospel. Luke's Gospel begins in the temple with Zechariah and the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist and then moves on to the foretelling of Jesus birth. Jesus comes down from heaven, lives his earthly life, which is a journey towards the cross to take on your sins. After his death he goes down into the ground, as he is laid in a tomb. Then he is raised from the dead and now he is raised to heaven – so it looks like instead of “what goes up must come down”, when it comes to Jesus, the saying should be “what goes down must come up”!

For us, we too will one day go down into the ground in the sleep of death. The gravity of our sin pulls us down and we cannot escape. We are all sinners and the wages of sin are death. But through his death, Jesus takes the weight of our sins away. He is the one that took the weight of your sins and the sins of the world on himself.

Therefore, when we put our trust in him through the power of the Holy Spirit, we rather than being weighed down by our sins are instead pulled up by Jesus. His mastery over sin, death and the devil means that he is the greater force. He proved this by his resurrection from the dead and his ascension. We are united to Christ not only in his death but also in his resurrection and ascension as well. So, when we die, our faith in what Jesus has done for us means that what goes down into the ground will also go up – up to heaven to live with Jesus forever.

This way of thinking is all very nice, and it is true, but, it misses the point of our text and doesn't explain how important the ascension of Jesus really is.

Luke uses the account of the ascension to move from the Gospel of Luke to the book of Acts – as you would have noticed from this morning's readings, the ascension account ends Luke and begins Acts. Similarly, the ascension sees Jesus move to the next stage of his mission. His earthly life is over, and he returns to heaven. Now he is not confined to a single earthly location - he can be in multiple places at once. He can be wherever two or three are gathered in his name and even more personally than that, he can assure each and every one of us, that he is with us always, to the very end of the age. Jesus leaves so that he can be with you, now, wherever you are.

They are important words, so let's unpack them a bit to see what it really means for us.

As we read in John 16:7 unless Jesus went away the Holy Spirit would not have come. So, if Jesus did not ascend to allow the Holy Spirit to come as he did at Pentecost, then the benefits of the coming of the Holy Spirit would not have been poured out.

The coming of the Holy Spirit allowed all Christians including you and me to have their minds opened so they can understand the scriptures – just as Jesus opened the disciples' minds in our text.

The Holy Spirit points people to Christ. He does this through the Word, and by reading the Word he opens people's minds to first realise that they are sinners and that their sin separates them from God. He also leads them to repent of their sins and to put their faith and trust in the forgiveness of their sins that comes through Christ's death and resurrection. Without the help of the Holy Spirit we cannot see our sins and hence our need for repentance.

We received the precious gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptism and it is he who creates and grows your faith and your understanding of what Jesus does for you. In response to that, we through the power of the Holy Spirit can be Christ's hands and feet here on earth. Think of how many hands and feet Christ has throughout the world now, through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Would that have been possible if he had not ascended to heaven? If Jesus had not ascended, he would be limited to his physical body on earth – he would have a single pair of hands and he would only have his own two feet, rather than being able to use, through the Holy Spirit, millions of hands and feet.

But that is not all, while Jesus has ascended to heaven and returned to his glory, seated at the right hand of God the Father, that doesn't mean that Jesus is not still present in the world. The Jesus is with you now – each and every one of you wherever and whenever you may be listening. Also, since he ascended and now is not present with his physical body, he is not subject to social distancing rules!

This is something that would have been impossible if he had not ascended to heaven. How could he be present in all those different places if he was still in his human body here on earth? Similarly, how could he be truly present in the Lord's Supper in so many different places at once?

To allow all this to happen it was necessary for Jesus to ascend to heaven.

So, by ascending, rather than being parted from us, Jesus goes up so that he can come down. Jesus leaves so that he can be with you now, wherever you are.

This doesn't just have implications for our lives, it has implications for worship as well.

Did you notice what the first thing the disciples did when Jesus ascended was? They worship him! They worship him where they were – it is only later they return to the temple to worship. That is not what was expected by the Jews. The temple was the place for worship, not the side of the road or on top of any old hill. Because the dwelling place for God on earth was the Holy of Holys, the closer you were to that the closer you were to God, and you wanted to be as close as possible to God when you worshiped. In addition, the Temple was the place where you needed to offer the sacrifices so that you could be put right with God. You were expected to be the one going to God, and God was at the temple.

But all of that changed with Jesus sacrifice of himself on the cross. No longer were any more sacrifices required, the great and perfect Passover lamb had been slain. The dwelling place of God was now not in the Holy of Holys it was now with all those who put their faith and trust in what Jesus had done for them. We are temples of the Holy Spirit and therefore are the dwelling places of God on earth. God comes to us.

We, like the disciples are now not restricted to only worshiping at the temple or in a church. That is an important message for us today, when we are not able gather together as a single body to worship. Therefore, we can worship wherever we are and whenever we can. Just as Jesus is no longer restricted to a single time and place, worship is not restricted to a single time and place.

Worshipping together in church is important and hopefully we will be able to gather together to do that again in the not too distant future.

Gathering together in church gives us a sense of community, helps us to strengthen one another and reminds us that we are one body united in Christ. It is there that we can join together with Christians of all times and places, to feed and be strengthened by the body and blood of Christ - given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

But that does not mean that worship can't take place wherever and whenever you are listening to this, Jesus is there with you now, right beside you. He is present where you are now!

That is why Jesus ascended. Now, he is not confined to a single location nor does he simply sit in his glory and leave it all up to the Holy Spirit.

The saying "what goes up must come down" does hold true after all. Jesus went up so that he could come down - to you, so he could be with each and every one of you wherever you are, so he could walk you through the ups and downs of life, and finally, bring each and every one of you home to be with him in heaven.

Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen