

Written Service 21st May 2023
A service of worship for use at home
Prepared by Rev Alan Hargrave

Ascension Sunday

Note: If you are following this on a computer or tablet you may wish to click on the [links](#) to hear the hymns on **YouTube** (apologies for any adverts that may pop up!) or simply sing them yourself from the text written below. The hymn numbers are from Singing the Faith.

Welcome Welcome to our worship this morning. We come together to seek God's presence, to worship God, and to bring all that is on our hearts before him. But before we begin, let us take a moment to still our hearts before God. You may care to say the following out loud, slowly and quietly:

I weave a silence onto my lips
I weave a silence into my mind
I weave a silence within my heart.
Calm me, O Lord, as you stilled the storm.
Still me, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Fill me, Lord, with your peace. Amen.

Easter Greeting Now, let us proclaim the glory of Easter, which is at the heart of our faith:
Alleluia, Christ is Risen **He is risen indeed. Alleluia**

Prayer

Risen Christ, for whom no door is locked, no entrance barred:
open the doors of our hearts, that we may see your face
and walk the joyful road of love, peace and risen life,
to the praise of God the Father. **Amen.**

Hymn So, let us proclaim Christ's resurrection as we sing: This joyful Eastertide 314
<https://youtu.be/5tipsbcfuB4>

This joyful Eastertide, away with sin and sorrow.
My Love, the Crucified, hath sprung to life this morrow.
Had Christ, that once was slain, ne'er burst his three-day prison,
Our faith had been in vain: but now hath Christ arisen, arisen, arisen, arisen.

My flesh in hope shall rest, and for a season slumber:
Till trump from east to west shall wake the dead in number.
Had Christ.....

Death's flood hath lost his chill, since Jesus crossed the river:
Lover of souls, from ill my passing soul deliver.
Had Christ.....

Confession Christ is risen. Yet, in our troubled world, and in our often troubled hearts,
it is hard to hold onto faith in the risen Lord.

Lord, when we doubt you **Reveal your presence to us**
Lord, when we cannot bear to watch the news **Speak peace to our hearts**

Lord, when we worry about the future **Remind us that you are Lord**
Lord, when personal troubles fill our thoughts **Grant us your peace**

Lord God, we confess our lack of faith in your Risen Son. Forgive us we pray. Help us to face the future with courage, hope and determination to work for a better world, in whatever ways we can. **Amen.**

Today's theme: The Ascension of Jesus

Over the past few months, we have followed the story of Jesus' life on earth – his birth, his baptism and temptation, his ministry, his journey to Jerusalem, his suffering, his cruel death and his glorious resurrection. But on Thursday, **Ascension Day**, we remembered that Christ did not remain among us in flesh and blood. He ascended into heaven to be with God the Father. We read about that now.

1st Reading: Acts 1:6-11

Then the disciples gathered around Jesus and 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."

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."

The Ascension 1

I don't know if you have ever been to Walsingham? It is the place where, in 1061, the Virgin Mary is reputed to have appeared Richeldis de Faverches, an English noblewoman. It soon became the most important pilgrimage site in the UK. Right up to the present day, pilgrims have flocked to Walsingham to visit the place where Mary is said to have appeared. One of the chapels in the Anglican Shrine is dedicated to the Ascension. The main feature of the chapel is in the roof, where you see a pair of feet disappearing into the ceiling! Whilst it is a fairly accurate, literal portrayal of the Ascension, according to our NT reading from Acts, it doesn't really capture the significance of the Ascension for us today. It tends to reinforce a view, which is not one supported by the Bible as a whole, that heaven is 'up there'. Another view many people hold is that heaven is 'in the future'. The truth, however, is that heaven is not simply in the future, nor is it 'up there'. It is **here** and **now**. It is **all around us**.

Let us now read about this same event in Luke's gospel.

2nd Reading. Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to the disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning

at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” 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. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

For the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

The Ascension 2

Many churches have, at their heart, an Octagon. If you have visited Ely Cathedral, you will have seen, at the centre of the building, the amazing, medieval Octagon tower, which leads you up, through images of saints and angels, to, at its centre, a painted wooden carving of the risen, ascended Jesus Christ. The Octagon is the place where, before the dissolution of the monasteries in Henry VIII’s reign, the monks worshipped. They worshipped right underneath that eight-sided tower. In their seven-day cycle of prayer, as they said their daily prayers, they were reminded, again and again, of the ‘**eighth day**’, which represented **heaven, eternity**. You see this too in Eastern Orthodox worship. Their churches are decorated with images of heaven, to remind us that we are not creating worship ourselves. Rather we are simply plugging into the ongoing, eternal worship which is happening all around us, in heaven. It is the same for us, as we meet together on a Sunday, or any other day, we are not *initiating* worship. We are simply plugging ourselves in, from time to time, to join that innumerable, heavenly cloud of witnesses who, day and night, surround the throne of God with their praises. Heaven is not ‘up there’. It is around us; within us! The Communion of Saints, from all ages and all nations, surrounding us with their prayers and praises, 24/7.

One of the striking things about the resurrection appearances is that Jesus clearly appears in flesh and blood. He is at pains to make sure that they do not think he is a ghost. He eats some fish to prove it. And he shows them the holes in his hands and the deep, red-raw gash in his side. He encourages them to touch him and to feel those wounds for themselves. The Jesus who ascends into heaven is not simply a spirit. He takes with him his scarred, wounded body. The thing is this: it is the **real, human** Jesus who ascends to heaven. And he takes with him those painful wounds, so that, at the very heart of the Trinity, God will forever know what it is like to be in **our** shoes. To be in the shoes of those who continue to suffer and die in wars - in Ukraine, in Sudan, in Yemen, in many other places. To be in the shoes of those who have been abandoned and betrayed by those they trusted the most. To be in the shoes of the women of Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia in their anguish, pain and unfulfilled dreams. To be in the shoes of those who are persecuted for their faith, ethnic origin, sexuality, or political views. To be in the shoes of those who suffer debilitating illness, isolation, depression. The **Ascension** reminds us that the God in heaven **forever** knows what it is like to be **us**, to be **me**, whatever our situation or circumstances. But it also reminds us that all the terrible things which happen do **not** have the last word. The last word is **resurrection**, victory over pain and death, and a place forever with God, in heaven.

Next Sunday we will celebrate **Pentecost**, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us the Holy Spirit is exactly like him; completely one with him and the Father, but no longer limited to a single body or a single place or time. The **Holy Spirit** is the helper, the comforter. The one who makes Jesus come alive for us, not just occasionally, but always. Who guides us and

empowers us to live for Christ. The one who strengthens us for whatever happens. And although we can't now see or touch Jesus physically, he comes to us **now**, through the Holy Spirit, as an inner presence, right inside us.

The Ascension is not simply about believing that Jesus has taken our humanity into heaven. Nor even that heaven is all around us. Nor even that Jesus is with us through his Spirit. The challenge is for us to internalize it, so that it becomes a **daily reality** in our lives.

The best analogy I can think of is the way children grow up. When we are first born, we cannot differentiate between ourselves and our mothers. As we grow into children our sense of personal identity develops, but we are still entirely dependent on our parents. But gradually, we begin to be able spend a day at a nursery without their physical presence, to let go of them. We go off for a sleepover with our mates. We rebel - which is about forming our own values, as opposed to those of our parents. We leave home and establish independent lives. And what do we discover, more often than not? Most of us find that, for better or worse, we turn out to be very much like our parents, even if, by now, they have died.

What has happened is not so much that we have **lost** them, but that we have **internalised** them. Not that they become me or I them. I retain my own individuality. But my parents continue to live on, **inside me**. Those of you who know me will know that I am always quoting my mother. I have my mum's strong sense of the equality & justice. And from my dad I have inherited my sense of humour and his penchant for telling stories. But I also have some of their chips on my own shoulders. I think it would be fair to say that, although both my parents are long dead, they still **live on in me**.

And so it is with Jesus. He is physically departing from his disciples, going to the Father. But he is **not** going away. Rather, through the Holy Spirit he remains with us. Grows **in** us. And, providing we allow him, makes us more and more like him. **Ascension and Pentecost** are intimately linked. The going away of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit are very much part of the same thing. As we allow the Holy Spirit entry into our lives, we grow more and more like Jesus. And our faith becomes **internalised**. The test of faith is how we are in our inner lives, day by day. How we face all the trials and temptations each day brings. And what we do that reflects the degree to which we have allowed the risen, ascended Christ, through his Holy Spirit, to be present, not just as we worship together, but as a growing, daily reality within each one of us. This poem expresses it better than I could:

When first I stepped inside thy house
Twas broad and light and high
And its beauty smote my breast_
Wherin did swell the water and the sigh

And in that place I learned to pray
Relieved of grief's despair
Attended all the live-long day
For healing of the bones, the water and the air.

But now, **thy** house, is within **me**
Its beauty and its space
Are there for grief and hope to be
In tears, in breathing, in **thy** Holy Place.

May we, this Ascensio[n]tide, open our hearts to the God who forever holds our humanity in his heart, in heaven, and who forever dwells in our hearts through his Spirit.

Amen.

Hymn So let us sing again: There is a Redeemer, 338. <https://youtu.be/MboAvzpvz58>

There is a redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son,
precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy One.

Thank you, O my Father, for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit, till the work on earth is done.

Jesus, my Redeemer, name above all names,
precious Son of God, Messiah, Lamb for sinners slain.

Thank you, O my Father, for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit, till the work on earth is done.

When I stand in glory, I will see his face
and there I'll serve my King for ever, in that holy place.

Thank you, O my Father, for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit, till the work on earth is done.

Intercessions Let us pray.

We come to God just as we are, with our troubles, our scars, our open wounds; with all that leaves us cast down, unable to lift our heads. But let us thank God that **he knows** what it is like to be us. That Jesus has taken with him all the scars, the wounds, the pain of the world, **my pain, my wounds**, forever, into the heart of God.

Thank you Lord that you understand all we are going through. And that you are with us through your spirit.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We pray, O God, for all who are scarred by conflict, strife, wars. We pray for the people of Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen. We pray for refugees, streaming across borders to flee violence, persecution and extreme poverty. May they know your surrounding presence in all their troubles.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We pray women in Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and many other places where they are denied an education, a career, equality with men. Have mercy upon such women and girls, many of whom suffer severely for demanding their rights.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

And we pray for those on our own hearts. Those who bear the deep scars and open wounds of their life's experience. Let us hold them before God now.

Have mercy, Risen, Ascended Lord, on those we know who bear the wounds of life and death.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

And, let us not forget to give thanks to God, for all the signs of new life around us. For growth, colour, hope, joy. Let us thank God for the many millions of decent, ordinary folk

who, despite their troubles, live with generosity, kindness and goodness in their hearts. Let's think of people we particularly want to give thanks for now.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

Finally, let us remind ourselves, despite all that is going on in the world, that Jesus **is** risen and that **his** Kingdom will indeed come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name

Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven

Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn So let us proclaim God's greatness as we sing 'My Jesus, my Saviour' 363

<https://youtu.be/mqSQvoinDE4>

My Jesus, my Saviour,
Lord, there is none like you;
all of my days, I want to praise
the wonders of your mighty love.

My comfort, my shelter,
tower of refuge and strength,
let every breath, all that I am,
never cease to worship you.

Shout to the Lord all the Earth, let us sing
power and majesty, praise to the King:
mountains bow down and the seas will roar
at the sound of your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands,
for ever I'll love you, for ever I'll stand;
nothing compares to the promise I have in you.

Blessing

**May the risen Christ, who takes our humanity forever into the heart of God
strengthen us, by the power of the Spirit, to live his wounded, risen life.**

**And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us, now and always. Amen.**

So, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Alan Hargrave, May 2023.