

## St. Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor—Ascension Sunday—27 April 2008

Revd Rob Lamerton

*Daniel 7.9-14; Psalm 93; Acts 1.1-11; Matthew 28.16-20*

I saw a program about climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge and wondered whether I would be willing to *ascend* to the top of the bridge at 134m (about 400 feet) above the sea. I decided that I couldn't do it! Isn't it strange that I should be scared to climb the bridge, yet have no difficulty flying on a plane at 39,000 feet and have been up in a hot-air balloon, probably to the height of the bridge?

I was thinking this as I pondered about the nature of Jesus' ascension!

The image we have is of Jesus being "taken up". The Gospel of Luke speaks about Jesus withdrawing from the disciples and being "carried up" into heaven. Similarly, the story from the Acts of the Apostles says that, while the disciples were waiting, "he was lifted up" and the cloud took him out of their sight. The Gospel of Mark says the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to the disciples, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. John's gospel has no ascension story. In today's reading from Matthew, there is the meeting of Jesus with the disciples on the mountain, the conferral of authority, and the sending of them to make disciples, to baptise, and to teach.

Thus, of the stories of Jesus' departure, there are two that tell of an ascension 'event', there is one that tells of a belief that Jesus has been taken up, and there is John's gospel with no ascension account (but with the resurrected Jesus giving the Spirit). In Matthew's gospel Jesus departs, but promises to be "with" his followers to the end of the age.

The stories that emphasise Jesus' "going up" present us with some difficult questions if we ask, "how did this happen?" Yet, if we look at their meaning, they tell us that Jesus, like the Kings of ancient Israel, ascended—not merely to a throne at the top of a long flight of steps—but to a place of honour and glory above and beyond the created order and into the very realm of God!

The ascension depicts Jesus as the Christ, the anointed Messiah, entering not merely into an earthly sovereignty but into a place of authority over all things.

In a time when we are talking about Australia becoming a republic and in a world in which sovereigns, monarchs, are in becoming fewer, it is difficult to describe Jesus as 'King'. The terms 'Christ' and 'Messiah' translate as 'king' but have in their meaning not just the notion of power but the deep responsibility to care for and nurture the King's subjects.

We still use the term 'king' or 'queen' to describe a person at the top of their chosen field: Elvis is called The King, Kylie Minogue is the Queen of Pop. There is Nat "King" Cole. Swimmers and athletics are kings and queens of the pool and the track.

Thinking on all this, I could only describe Jesus' 'chosen field of endeavour' as being the service of God and humanity. And in these he has prevailed as King!

As Jesus gathers his disciples together on the mountain in Galilee, things have come full circle, for this is where he began! He has been baptised, called his followers, taught, preached, healed, worked miracles, argued with the authorities, been arrested, crucified, and is risen. Now he returns to Galilee to commission his followers as he goes away.

The mountain-top setting recalls another scene where Jesus, after his baptism, was taken to a very high mountain by the Devil, who “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.” He promised to give Jesus power over all of those, if Jesus would worship and serve him. We recall that Jesus declined, but now, on the mountain in Galilee, he reveals that “all authority in heaven and in earth has been given to me.”

What the Devil offered, although enticing, proved illusory, as Jesus chose the harder road and prevailed.

But what does this idea of Jesus being Lord over all creation say to us when we know that people around the world still suffer hunger, poverty, and disease (Anzac Day, 25 April, is also World Malaria Day; it is a disease from which thousands of children die each day.), where war drags on, and where children are abused and neglected in our own society?

It says to me that we need  
to keep our focus of this Christ who is Lord and  
to know also that we are called, in our own chosen field at home all work or school,  
to be and make disciples  
to live the life of Christ in prayerful and practical ways, and  
to know that, although he goes away, he is also with us to the close of the age.