

*Jesus's Ascension: A Proclamation not a Projectile*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sermon for Ascension Sunday, Year A—21 May 2023

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

*Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53*

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Jesus' Ascension is the sort of claim that can go in one Christian ear and out the other. Literally-minded modern people might imagine that it's about Jesus going up into the air, even up into space, and have trouble believing that. But thinking that the Ascension is an early space flight gets the wrong end of the stick, creating unnecessary problems for believers. Let's try to fix that. Let's see how to take the Ascension seriously without taking it literally.

It helps to see the Ascension as part of a bigger picture—part of how the early Christian imagination presented Jesus's Easter triumph over sin and death. Jesus's resurrection, ascension and the giving of the Holy Spirit belong together, and while scripture and Christian tradition separate them, they do so as elements of the one encompassing reality.

In all our readings today, the Ascension is presented as the risen Jesus exalted to God's place in heaven, ready to pour out the Holy Spirit on his Church. And because Jesus had been recognized as no less than God with us, his place with God was up there, where everyone in that ancient culture believed that God lived. But that was then. We have a different cosmology now. Now we see the Ascension not as a literal ascent to a God up there, but as a metaphor for the risen Jesus reigning in the cosmos as part of God's life, channelling the Holy Spirit who guides and enlivens the Church that's his body on earth.

Ascension is about the risen Jesus and the triumph of his love, of his life-giving power; it's not a story of his ascent through the stratosphere, then presumably out past the moon and Mars. Yuri Gagarin famously boasted that he'd been up into space but he hadn't seen God. But that cosmonaut was assuming that Christians must take the old cosmology literally, which is to entirely miss the New Testament point. Christ exalted in God's life isn't about physical ascent to a particular place, it's about authority and universality.

The two men in white who appeared at Jesus' empty tomb in Luke are back in our Acts reading today, linking the resurrection to the Ascension, and Acts also recalls the risen Jesus's promise to give his Spirit to the Church. The same writer, Luke, at the end of his Gospel that we hear today, presents the Ascension as a kind of stage direction in a play, which gets the lead actor off stage so the play can move on to its next stage, which in this case is Jesus's return to us through the Holy Spirit.

Our epistle today makes all this very real and immediate for Christians, presenting the Ascension in terms of Jesus' triumph over all the powers that control and harm and diminish human life—raised from death and exalted to God's right hand. This means that the Church now shares in God's gracious purposes for all creation, the triumph of God's life and love, which is now our boast and our business.

And our psalm today shows where this imagination begins, a psalm beloved by the Jews, who use it at the festival of Rosh HaShanah. Psalm 47 is a kind of Marseillaise, rejoicing in the triumph of Israel's God, celebrating Israel's deliverance from its enemies, and the future hope that Israel would again one day be at peace—a promise that we Christians, in solidarity with our Jewish cousins, believe has been fulfilled in Israel's great son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, Ascension is part of the good news tapestry of Easter, the triumph of the cross and the resurrection revealed as cosmic and ultimate. This is why the Easter Season in our Church calendar is concluded by Ascension and then next Sunday comes Pentecost. We're not talking about a growing list of literal events that modern people must inevitably find hard to believe, or else feel that they have to insist on in a literalistic way. Instead, it's about one multifaceted event that you and I are caught up in still. It empowers the Church to find a different way of living in the world, as our risen Lord calls every self-aggrandising, every life-destroying power into question. The Ascension celebrates that Jesus Christ is Lord—not some wretched ideology, not some war-mongering dictator, not some cynical authoritarian populist.

The Lord be with you . . .