COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE

Ascension Day Online

**THURSDAY, 21 May 2020, 7:00 p.m.**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Ascension Day along with Christmas, Easter and Pentecost is one of the four major Christian festivals. Nevertheless, in certain parts of the church it is very often overlooked. This is partly because it falls on a weekday, partly because it is easily overshadowed by the fire and excitement of Pentecost ten days later, and partly because unlike the others no public holiday is involved. It wasn't always so. Whilst Ascension Day is no longer a holiday in this country there are many parts of the world where it continues to be.

The Day of Ascension occurs 40 days after the resurrection and 10 days before Pentecost. It stands therefore at a transition point between the post resurrection encounters with Jesus and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost.

Jesus taught his disciples that he must ascend to his Father (John 20:17) and that, unless he did, the Spirit could not come (John 16:5-7). Jesus in human form could only be with some people, in some places, at some times, but by ascending to the Father in heaven he would send the Holy Spirit so that by his Spirit Christ could be with everyone, everywhere, all the time (John 14:23). Jesus, ascended, is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Our first hymn captures something of Jesus’ triumphant reign: All Hail the Power.

**Hymn : All Hail the power of Jesus’ name** (StF 342)

All Hail the power of Jesus’ name

Let angels prostrate fall;
*Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,
Ye ransomed from the fall,
*Hail Him Who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

Let every tongue and every tribe,
Responsive to his call

*To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

O That with all the sacred throng

we at his feet may fall

*We’ll join the everlasting song*

*And crown Him Lord of all!*

*﻿Edward Perronet (1726–1792)*

**Minister:** Let us confess our sins to God

and ask him to cleanse us:

**Father eternal, giver of light and grace,**

**we have sinned against you, against our neighbour, and against each other,**

**in thought, word and deed,**

**in the evil we have done**

**and in the good we have not done,**

**through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.**

**We have wounded your love, and marred your image within us. We are sorry and ashamed and repent of all our sins.**

**For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,**

**who died for us, forgive us all that is past**

**and lead us out of darkness**

**to walk as children of light. Amen.**

*Silence*

If we walk in the light as he is in the light,

we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

This is Christ’s gracious word: ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ **Amen. Thanks be to God.**

**Minister:** Eternal and gracious God,

grant that as we believe your Son, or Saviour,

Jesus Christ, to have ascended with triumph

into your kingdom in heaven, so may we also

in heart and mind ascend to where he is

and with him continually dwell;

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of

the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. **Amen.**

**Scripture**

The ascension of Christ carries enormous theological significance. Christ’s ascension means that in heaven there is one who, knowing first-hand our experience of suffering and temptation, prays for us and perfects our prayers. His ascension is a witness and guarantee of our own bodily resurrection, as well as an invitation for us to set our hearts and minds “on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1-2) to rule over all things in heaven and throughout the universe (Eph. 1:10, 20-23).

The ascension of Jesus serves as the prelude to Pentecost when the power of the risen Christ came upon all believers through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps most significantly, with Christ’s ascension comes the promise that this Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

So let us now listen to the Word of the Lord.

**Psalm 47**

Clap your hands, all you peoples;

shout to God with loud songs of joy.

For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.

God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.

The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham.

For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted.

**Hebrew 4.14–16**

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke.

Hear the Gospel of Christ: **Glory to Christ our Saviour.**

**Luke 24.44–53**

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the Gospel of Christ, **Praise to Christ our Lord.**

**Hymn: Before the Throne of God Above**

Before the Throne of God Above

I have a strong, a perfect plea:
A great High Priest, whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is graven on his hands,
My name is written on his heart;
I know that while in heaven he stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look, and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.

Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me
To look on Him and pardon me.

Behold him there, the risen Lamb
My perfect, spotless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I AM,
The King of glory and of grace!

One in himself, I cannot die
My soul is purchased by his blood
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ, my Saviour and my God
With Christ, my Saviour and my God

*Charitie Lees Smith (1841–1923)*

**The Sermon**

The ascension of Jesus is in many ways the counterpoint to Christmas. Whereas at Christmas we celebrate, Immanuel, God with us, at Ascension we celebrate that one of us is with God.

The writer of Hebrews expresses this beautifully, reminding us that in Jesus we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens. On the one hand, our High priest is very great. Jewish high priests were the only ones authorised to pass beyond the curtain in the Temple separating the holy of holies from the rest of the holy place in the temple. It was a tremendous honour to do this, and they did so only once per year on the feast of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. But Jesus, our great high priest, did not simply pass through the curtains of the holy place temple. He passed through the heavens, and is in the presence of the Father. Jesus is indeed a great High Priest.

However, our great high priest is not only great he is also one of us. We do not have a high priest unable to sympathize with our weakness. No! We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are. We’ve got an inside man.

To have an inside man who has been tested as we are is a huge privilege. We have a high priest seated at the right hand of the Father interceding for us who actually understands what our lives are about and sympathises. Jesus gets it and gets us. The ascension of Jesus is our guarantee that we have a God who truly gets us.

One of the striking things about Christian theology is this idea of, the bodily ascent of Jesus into heaven so that something of our humanity, resurrected and redeemed, is incorporated into the very being of God.

God did not simply become one of us for a time, or in order to accomplish a task. God did not merely engage in a cultural exchange trip to experience what it’s like for the Creator to live like the created for a season. No that’s not our understanding of God in Christian theology. No. Our understanding is that God so irrevocably identified with humanity, that when God took our humanity into Godself, it was permanent and eternal.

God in Christ took on human flesh, was born as we are born, lived as we live, loved as we should love, died as we all die, and was the first to be raised from the dead as we can all hope to be raised. And in that resurrection body Jesus passed through the heavens as our great high priest.

That divine action of descent and ascent which we celebrate in the life of life, death, resurrection and ascension of ascension highlights a number of additional truths about God and humanity, and indeed all creation.

Christianity would have been much simpler and more straightforward if we’d amalgamated resurrection and ascension. If the disciples and the Church which resulted from their testimony had made the claim that Jesus is alive but he’s in heaven, he laid down his physical body on the cross and returned to the Father in Spirit, that would have been a much simpler thing to wrap our minds around.

But that’s not the testimony of the Church. The testimony of the church is that Christ was raised bodily from the tomb, so the tomb was empty. And that he ascended bodily into heaven, so that Jesus disappeared from everyday life.

The bodily resurrection and, more so, bodily ascension of Jesus says something terribly significant about the value of our bodies and of creation. Some of us as Christians look forward to the day when we will be set free form our bodies, especially those of us whose bodies don’t work as well as they used to or as they should.

God doesn’t want to set us free from our bodies, any more than God in Christ wanted to be set free from his body. No God created our bodies and all of creation and loves what he has made.

Lots of us Christians are so boring, aren’t we? We seem only to have interests in overtly spiritual things. But God isn’t only interested in spiritual things. God’s interested in everything because all of creation is God’s and comes from God. Whether it’s science or art, sport or politics, music or videogames, food, fashion or friendships, gardening or singing, or beekeeping God’s interested in it all because it’s all God’s creation. And ultimately all of creation has the capacity to be spiritual.

On this day of ascension, we don’t only celebrate Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father. We also anticipate that he will one day return. Creation is important. It’s God breathed. Life is good, even under lockdown conditions. But this life is not all that there is. That Jesus ascended to heaven is a deposit, a promise, that one day Christ will return from heaven and bring us to himself.

That’s another aspect that we sometimes struggle to believe, or act as if we do not believe. But Christianity does not make sense unless there is a fuller dimension than life as it is at the moment.

Because whilst it is true that creation is of God and is good. It’s also broken. We are seeing some of that brokenness in the global pandemic which simply exacerbates some of the inequalities and divisions that already exist. The pandemic has brought out acts of kindness and neighbourliness, but it also exposed our selfishness as we scrambled to take toilet rolls, hand sanitiser and eggs for our own use but were less concerned about others. Creation is good, but broken.

The promise of Jesus coming again is about coming to bring redemption to all creation. This is what Jesus’ resurrection and ascension ultimately point to, the day when all creation shall be put right, when our brokenness, our sinfulness, our limitations will be healed, redeemed and removed.

The Ascension of Jesus is a deposit of all that is to come. Until then we have an inside man to help us in our weakness and to intercede with the Father for us. That is good news for us all. Amen.

**Litany for Ascension Day**

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,

a new world has broken into ours **—**

**a world in which justice does come for the poor,**

**freedom comes for the prisoners,**

**and healing for the sick.**

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,

a new community has been formed—

**a community that loves and cares for all members,**

**a family that welcomes all who are abandoned and rejected, a place where all find a place of belonging.**

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,

a new creation has begun—

**all that was distorted is being restored,**

**all that is corrupted is being renewed,**

**all that was broken is being made whole**.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,

God’s new world has begun. **Amen.**

**Prayers of Intercession**

Let us join our prayers with those of our Saviour Christ,

seeking the Father’s blessing and the gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus Christ, great high priest,

living for ever to intercede for us,

pray for the Church, your broken body in the world …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, king of righteousness,

enthroned at the right hand of the majesty on high,

pray for the world, and make it subject to your gentle rule …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, Son of Man,

drawing humanity into the life of God,

pray for your brothers and sisters in need, distress or sorrow.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, pioneer of our salvation,

bringing us to glory through your death and resurrection,

surround with your saints and angels

those who have died trusting your promises …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, Lord over all things,

ascended far above the heavens and filling the universe,

pray for us who receive the gifts you give us

for work in your service …

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Jesus Christ, keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit

and in the bond of peace,

and bring the whole created order to worship at your feet;

for you are alive and reign

with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

We say together the prayer Jesus gave us in its modern form:

**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.**

**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 : Crown him with many crowns** (StF 347)

Crown him with many crowns

The Lamb upon His throne;
Hark! how the heav’nly anthem drowns
All music but its own!
Awake, my soul, and sing
Of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy chosen King
Through all eternity.

Crown him the Son of God,

Before the worlds began;

And ye who tread where he has trod,

Crown him the Son of Man,

Who every grief has known

That wrings the human breast,

And takes and bears them for his own,

That all in him may rest.

﻿Crown him the Lord of life,

﻿Who triumphed o’er the grave,

And rose victorious in the strife

For those he came to save.

His glories now we sing,

Who died, and rose on high;

Who died, eternal life to bring,

And lives, that death may die.

Crown Him the Lord of heaven,
Enthroned in Worlds Above

Crown him the King to whom is given

The wondrous name of Love

All hail, Redeemer, hail!
For Thou hast died for me;
Thy praise shall never, never fail
Throughout eternity.

*﻿Matthew Bridges (1800–1894) & Godfrey Thring (1823–1903)*

**The Benediction**

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make his face

shine upon you and be gracious to you

The Lord look on you with kindness

and give you peace. **Amen.**

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