

Ephesians 1: 15-23 & Luke 24: 44-end

"He Ascended into Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father"

Sermon – Closer to God

New Technology

Well you may or may not be aware that much of my working life has been spent working in offices. From starting my career in industry as a filing clerk to finishing it as a Plant Hire Branch Manager, the one thing that was in constant evolution during all those years was the Information Technology systems. And as technology become more complex and central to daily operations, the potential to get into a complete mess became more usual. So much time was spent talking to the superheroes of the IT Help-desk in what we would call, the Bat-phone.

And as technology became more sophisticated so did the solutions. I could handle the basic instructions such as the classic 'Turn it all off and on again'; but when they would try and talk me through writing queries, reprogramming codes and running diagnostics, it was akin to rocket science – and very stressful.

So when new technology came in, which allowed the IT help-desk to actually see and take control of the branch systems, and I could just sit back and watch as our screens were being operated on and foxed from miles away, it was a relief.

This new technology brought us in the branch and the IT help-desk at head office into each other's presence, virtually at least.

Hold that thought in your minds as we look at today's line from the Nicene Creed

"He Ascended into Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father"

Ascension in Luke and Acts

So to remind ourselves, the Ascension of Jesus took place 40 days after the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. In his Gospel and in his book of Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the moment Jesus '*withdrew from his disciples and was carried up into heaven*'. The council at Nicaea, and Constantinople, using imagery from Psalm 110, added that when back in heaven, Jesus sat at the right hand of the Father.

Now at the basic level, the Ascension is the balance to the Incarnation. It that, God came, in Jesus, from Heaven to be in humanity's presence; and in the Ascension, our humanity is taken in Jesus, into Heaven to be in God's presence.

But there is of course more to it than that.

What actually happened?

We need to be cautious about taking anything too literally, and in the Ascension, and in the *sitting down next to God*, is a case in point.

Heaven

Firstly, in, not just Luke but the whole New Testament, Heaven is not a location; it is not a place 'up there', but a realm if you like; the realm in which God exists. In the Bible, earth is our space, Heaven is God's space, and it won't be until the end of the Book of Revelation when the two become one, merging into the presence of the other.

The moment of Ascension, along with the resurrected body of Jesus, are where these dimensions of Heaven and earth exist together, simultaneously, in a foretaste of what it will be like that day when Heaven and earth are joined. A bit like that new IT technology that brought the head office and branch together, the

ascension brought humanity and divinity together, but in a much more real, much deeper and far more profound way.

The right hand

Secondly, this story would have resonated very strongly in the decade of the 70s, when the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, were being read out to people across the Roman Empire. And the Romans, it is fair to say, would have seen this story of the Ascension, as a deliberate attempt to challenge the skill and authority of the emperor.

The Roman emperor was one of the most powerful people in human history. He was the head religious official; he had control, and was in authority over Rome's military governors, and thus, over most of the Roman army and the political system. With these powers, the emperor had complete power over life and death. The Emperor possessed all authority, control and power. All things belonged to the emperor.

So much so that when a Roman emperor died, people would claim to see the sight of his soul the escaping from his body and going upwards into the sky, as if to the imagined heaven of the Roman gods. The message to the people was clear: the old emperor has become a god and therefore the new emperor can legitimately be called the son of god.

But for the Christians in the Roman Empire, there was only one Son of God, and it was not the emperor of Rome. It was, Jesus, in the true Heaven, and in the seat of honour, the right-hand seat of God, which gives to it occupant all authority, control, and power. The Ascension then meant that all things then belonged to Jesus.

Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians couldn't have made this any clearer. The ascended Jesus, is superior to every other title of

authority, including that of emperor. And going even further, Christ is superior to the *spiritual* rulers, forces and powers, not just the earthly ones.

Authority?

But this gives us a problem. We might believe that Jesus has authority, control and power, but when we look at the world and life, it doesn't always feel like it does it?

To use my earlier story as a sort of comparison, it isn't the helpful IT experts helping to resolve our mess and problems, but more like cyber criminals intent on causing much trouble, grief and pain. If Jesus *is* in charge, as this line in the Creed claims, just why do the bad things keep happening; and we only have to look at situations past and present in our world, society and our own lives to see some terrible suffering that's going on.

Could I really look into the eyes of the parents who have had their children murdered in Southport this week and tell that Jesus has ascended and is in control? The same point applies to any tragic situation.

And this same question would have been asked by the New Testament Christians, suffering persecution amongst other things. It was and is a legitimate question to ask. Are you really with *us*, Jesus in our mess?; are you *really* the seat of control? Are we really with *you*, in God's presence?

Faith

There is no simple answer, and this is why we, like those first disciples say, we *believe*, rather than we *know* - a statement of trust, commitment and hope, because we cannot know it all now. Faith is not the opposite of doubt and questioning, but of certainty and arrogance. Faith means we have the room within ourselves to grow and learn. Only when heaven and earth are united, as the ascension assures us of, will we understand.

And until then, we don't need a Bat-phone to get in touch, and advanced technology to feel close to God when we are in a mess, a simple prayer will do. Faith is looking at the world with all its mess and still believing Jesus has ascended and is seated at the right hand of God and hears out prayers.

God cannot simply turn off the world, and turn it all on again; the solution to the problems of humanity need a far more complex solution.

Therefore, to believe that Jesus ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father, is to be assured that He *is* carrying us with him; *that he really has taken control; that He really does have the authority to sort out the world's problems once and for all.* And so, similar to those first disciples of Jesus, this is a good reason for us to be joyful and here in church blessing God. Amen

Revd Richard Haynes

10th Sunday after Trinity 4 August 2024