



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Stewards of Grace

**Daniel 7:13-14, Acts 1:1-11,
& 1 Peter 4:7-11**

Fr. William Klock

May 13, 2018 – Ascension

The Feast of the Ascension reminds us each year that Jesus is Lord. The empty tomb at Easter proclaims his lordship. The world declared him a false messiah and crucified him, but in raising Jesus from the dead, God overturned that verdict and declared that Jesus is indeed Creation's true King. And, as kings do, Jesus has taken his throne. Ascension affirms that what we read in our Old Testament lesson isn't some future hope, but that it's current reality. In Daniel 7 we see Jesus in his ascension, taking his throne:

**I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of
heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of
Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and
languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting
dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.**
(Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus has dominion and glory and a kingdom and that kingdom includes all of Creation—every people, nation and language. His kingdom is everlasting. In his ascension Jesus fulfilled the hopes of Israel. He reveals the covenant faithfulness of God. He is truly the King who will set the world to rights.

And yet the project that Jesus began has not been completed. He's inaugurated a new kingdom. He's inaugurated a new age. But the full thing, the actual making of all things new is yet to come. The kingdom is very much "already", but it's also "not yet". This is what surprised the Jews. They expected the King to come and to vanquish all of his enemies—really, all of *their* enemies—and then to rule like another King David or Solomon. They expected the King to arrive at the *end* of history—to bring all things to a close and to usher in a new and glorious age. But instead, the King came into the *middle* of history. He inaugurated a new age, but the powers and ideas and corruption of the old age are still here. Ultimately defeated and less powerful, yes, but still here, still lashing out in their death throws. Still doing damage. Still corrupting. Still leading people astray. And so some have chosen to reject the King. If he were really King, they say, there would be no more evil or pain or sorrow.

And yet that's to misunderstand the King and his kingdom just as so many misunderstood and rejected him when he came and when he died on the cross. We forget that, as St. John writes, he came not to condemn, but to redeem. Sinners were already condemned. We don't need a condemning Messiah. What we need is a *saving* Messiah. He is also the just Judge who will one day finally set Creation to rights, putting even death under his feet, and erasing from his Creation every bit of sin and idolatry and corrupting influence. But that's just why we need a Messiah, a King who is a saviour. Because without a saviour, without a King who comes to redeem, every one of us will be wiped from the face of Creation. We are the sinners, we are the idolaters, we are the corruptors of his good Creation. And so he first steps into history not as Judge, but as Saviour—to deliver us from sin and death, to forgive our sins, and to fill us with his own Spirit to set us right—to place in us a love for God that we had long forgotten. And then,

here's the remarkable part, to work through us in order to carry this forgiveness and life to the world.

Now, if we know Israel's story, this shouldn't come as a surprise. This was God's plan from the beginning: to call a family, a people—a holy priesthood—to represent him and to make him known. He started with Abraham and grew a family and then a nation and then, in Jesus, transformed that people, incorporating them—us—into himself and filling us with his Spirit in order to fulfil the prophecy that his glorious kingdom would include every people, nation, and language. Brothers and Sisters, the Church, transformed and empowered by the Spirit, is God's means of transforming Creation. Jesus has begun the process that will rejoin heaven and earth. One day that process will be complete, but in the meantime you and I, this family of people who are in Jesus the King and empowered by his Spirit, are the beachhead, the front line in the war, and the colony establishing itself as enemy territory is pushed back. We march into the world, proclaiming the good news that this Jesus, who died and rose again, is Lord and we leave the world transformed in our wake as we—his Church—live out the practical implications of that good news.

Think of the image in our lesson this morning from Acts. Luke tells us that the disciples stood in awe as Jesus ascended. They just stood there looking up. He doesn't say for how long, but my guess would be it was a while. They would have been dumbfounded. This is what Daniel said the Messiah would do. And, it's worth noting, this is what the Roman emperors claimed happened to them when they died—they ascended into heaven to become gods. Everybody knew they didn't really, but it was part of the imperial cult—their patriotic civil religion. But Jesus just did it for real. And so there they stood and suddenly two angels appear. And the angels don't even give the disciples

five minutes to marvel and wonder. They say to them, “Men of Galilee! What are you doing staring into the sky? Jesus is coming back. Didn’t he give you work to do in the meantime!”

Go to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth with this message, Jesus had told them. I’m sure they were overwhelmed by that. I expect that just the idea of taking the message throughout Judea was overwhelming, let alone to the Samaritans—nobody liked them—and the whole earth? It would take quite a while for that to sink in. That meant taking the message and the hope of God’s new Creation to Gentiles—to unclean, godless pagans. They really did have work to do. And that’s why Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and to wait. He knew that this work would be impossible. They needed a helper to walk with them and to equip and empower them. He was sending them out to fulfil the mission God had given to his people Israel, but all along Israel had failed because she had the same problem as everyone else. The hearts of Israel were just as corrupt and rebellious as the hearts of everyone else in the world. Jesus brought forgiveness. Now he had to give new life, now he had to give the Spirit. This was the covenant renewal the prophets had spoken about—the great new thing that finally set right the hearts of God’s people so that they could fulfil their mission to the world.

These ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost serve as an annual reminder in the midst of the Church Year that Jesus came to fulfil God’s promises and to renew his covenant with this gift of the Spirit. These ten days remind us that the gift of the Spirit is not some optional extra for Christians as some have taught. It’s not something that comes later or that you have to pray for or to work towards. The gift of the Spirit is at the *heart* of what it means to be part of God’s people, it’s what it means to be “in Christ”, as Paul so often puts it. It’s the Spirit who unites us to Jesus

and who renews our hearts and minds, filling them with love for God and empowering us to fulfil the kingdom mission Jesus has given. It’s the Spirit who “makes us Christian”, as Paul says, “No one acknowledges that Jesus is Lord apart from the working of the Spirit in him.”

In the Epistle for the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, St. Peter tells us what this all looks like—and it might be a little different from what we’d expect. Here’s what he writes. This is 1 Peter 4, beginning at verse 7:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

The end is at hand. That’s the sort of thing that gets people worked up and freaked out. But Jesus says, don’t get worked up and don’t freak out. You’ve got work to do. It’s a reminder that Jesus stepped into the middle of history to bring redemption, and that means that the end of history is coming, when he will judge sin, defeat death, and wipe every corrupting influence from his Creation. The Church’s mission, empowered by the Spirit, is to prepare the world for that day through the proclamation of the good news about Jesus.

That’s a lot of work to do. Sometimes it seems that these days our mission is going in reverse—at least in our own part of the world. Instead of the gospel advancing, the world around us seems to be becoming de-christianised. But Jesus gave us the Spirit for a reason, to accomplish this kingdom mission, and he did not establish his Church and fill it with his Spirit in vain. One day, whether half-a-thousand or ten thousand years from now, the Church’s work will be done by the grace of God and we can live and work in faith and in hope knowing that we have not been given God’s Spirit in vain.

And Peter says that this work will be accomplished by self-controlled and sober-minded people. It’s hard to accomplish anything in a panic. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit and being sober-minded is the fruit of having our minds renewed by the Holy Spirit. The end is coming. Others may panic, but if you’re in Jesus and if his Spirit is in you, your response ought to be prayer. Think of Jesus. When he was in a crunch what did he do? He went off by himself and he prayed. Our response to pressure and to the weight of our mission ought to be prayer as well.

But it’s more than just being people of self-control and prayer. It’s also essential that God’s people stick together and work together. God reaches out to each of us individually, but God has always worked and continues to work not through individuals off doing their own thing, but through his people, through his Church as a whole. Just as he gave Israel as a people and as a holy nation a mission in the Old Testament, he gives us, his new Israel, a mission. We each have our part in it, but it’s not your mission or my mission; it’s *our* mission. That’s something many modern Christians are prone to forgetting. Look at 1 Peter 4:8-9 now:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Peter knew how easy it is for us to go our own ways, but he says that the love the Spirit works in us will counter that tendency. What does loving look like? Brothers and Sisters, it looks like unity and it looks like forgiveness. It’s easy to be offended by a brother or a sister and it happens all the time in the church. Someone says something that someone else find offensive and off they go. The really sad thing is that it’s rare offense was ever intended. Most of these things are misunderstandings or someone just having a bad day. It’s easy to look at

the church and see friends gathering together and say that this is what love looks like, but if you *really* want to see what love looks like, it's not a group of people who are easy going, like-minded, and easy to get along with getting together. True love is when we get together and stick together even when some of us are difficult or having bad days or going through hard times. True love is seeing a church in which Jew and Gentiles, slave and free, men and women, young and old are all one in Jesus and love each other, but it's also a church in which someone like the wealthy Philemon forgives and fellowships and loves Onesimus, the slave who stole from him and ran away. We see love in the easy relationships, but we see it even more in the hard ones and as we bear with and forgive each other. We see love as we stick together no matter what. I'm reminded of Hebrews 10:24-25:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The day is drawing near. Don't panic. Instead, stir each other up to love and good works and don't neglect to meet together.

It's funny. If you asked me to write a letter exhorting the Church as to what to do in light of the end of all things, I'd probably write something about getting out into the world to tell people about Jesus. I'm sure I'd stress the urgency of telling people about Jesus. But both Peter and the writer of Hebrews, instead, tell us to love each other. Brothers and Sisters, what they're saying—and this is important—is that before we do anything else, we, the Church, need to *be* the Church, we need to be the body of Christ. Loving each other, supporting each other, showing hospitality to each other—even when we're sometimes difficult to get along

with or overly needy or whatever makes us difficult—and we can all be like this sometimes—loving each other despite our flaws and difficulties and allowing our love for each other to cover those difficulties and offenses and things that can sometimes be abrasive, that kind of love binds us together. And being bound together two things happen. First, we function the way Jesus and the Spirit intend. The Spirit has given us all unique gifts. When we work together we complement each other as we fulfil the mission Jesus has given. But the love we're called to show each other is also a powerful part of our witness. There is no other organization or institution or club in this world that brings together people of such different backgrounds and culture and age and temperament than the Church and in that we have a powerful witness to the redeeming grace of God.

Last week St. James told us to be *doers* of the word and not hearers only. This is what that looks like. And it's this love and light that plays out amongst Jesus people—amongst *us*—that not only holds us together, but it draws in, it attracts outsiders. It's this love and light that Jesus will be looking for when he returns. Jesus won't come looking for his Church based on our good theology. As important as good theology is, Jesus will find his Church as he sees the evidence of our faith and belief worked out in practice. (Good theology is important in directing our faith into that Christ-like practice.) Jesus will be saying “Well done, good and faithful servant” based on our having shown love and hospitality and how we've treated each other and how we've been faithful in proclaiming his lordship to the world. A master doesn't reward his servant for *knowing* what he was supposed to do in his absence. He rewards his servant for actually having *done* it. And it's just so for us.

Peter goes on in verses 10-11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The Spirit has equipped each of us and we're called to use these gifts to serve each other. The Spirit doesn't give us gifts to squander or to use for our own gain. They're meant to build up the Church and to help us fulfil our mission. And Peter here calls us to be good stewards.

And, note—this is important—we're not just accountable to God; we're accountable to each other as stewards. How often do we think it's just “between myself and God”? Over and over I meet people who claim to be Christians, but who have nothing to do with the body of Christ, with the Church. I have to say I'm always more than a little suspicious of the genuineness of someone's claim to be a Christians when they have no interest in the Church. You can't claim to love Jesus and then despise his body! There's no such thing as a loner Christian and this is in part why. Imagine if tomorrow your eyes or your feet decided they weren't interested in being part of your body. You'd be in a world of hurt and the same goes for the Church. We are called to love each other and withdrawing and keeping your God-given gifts to yourself is the opposite of that.

More than anything else this is why the Church is so often ineffective in fulfilling our mission. Too many of us our failing to be good stewards of what God has given us for ministry. In the typical church about 10% of the people 90% of the work. In the typical church about 10% of the

people give 90% of the money. I'm glad that we're not the typical church. We do better than that, but we have room for improvement. But think about it. What if 10% of your body had to do 90% of the work. You wouldn't live very long. Thankfully our God is gracious. Thankfully he's built his body in such a way that it doesn't die if only 10 or 20% of it is working. But at the same time, the body of Christ is crippled if the person gifted to be an ear is also forced by necessity to be eyes and fingers, because the people gifted to be eyes and fingers aren't using their gifts. Again, Peter's telling us that if God has gifted you—and he's generously gifted all of us—don't hold out. He's gifted you, he's equipped you for a reason. We need to ask ourselves if we're willing to give back to God for his service a portion of our time and our talent and our treasure. They all came from him in the first place. He's the one who really owns them. If we're not willing to give a portion back it not only hurts us individually, but it hurts the whole body. It's also a counter-witness to the good news. If Jesus is truly Lord, as we proclaim, we need to live that truth out in faith, giving our all to him and for the use of his kingdom.

Think on that this week. Jesus came not to condemn but to redeem. He's commissioned us, his people, to proclaim that good news—his death, his resurrection, his forgiveness, his life, his kingdom. He's even empowered us for that mission with God's own Spirit. Our mission is to prepare the world for the end of history, for the coming of the King as judge, to finally and fully make all things new. We've been given a huge job. Don't panic. Don't freak out. Be self-controlled and sober-minded. Commit yourselves to prayer, show each other unfailing love, and work together as the body of Christ, being faithful stewards of the gifts the Spirit has given.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, as we acknowledged in the Collect, Jesus has ascended to his heavenly throne, but you have not left us comfortless. You've graciously given us the gift of your Spirit and by your Spirit you unite us to Jesus, you transform and sanctify us, and you equip us to do the work Jesus has given. Give us grace and teach us to be faithful stewards of the Spirit's gifts. Teach us to bear the Spirit's fruit and let us live that fruit in practical ways and especially as we love one another and as we support one another in using the gifts the Spirit has given as we make Jesus and his kingdom known to the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.