



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Ascension Sunday Daniel 7:9-14 & Acts 1:1-11

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As you came today you walked through the lychgate and under those words carved on it: “Jesus is Lord”. That’s the central truth we celebrate and remember in the Ascension and it’s an exhortation we need to hear right now more than ever. People are living in fear of sickness. Our government is trying to control the spread of that sickness—and for so much of the last year it feels like we’re wasting out time, like those people out cutting scotch broom along the public right of ways, while acres upon acres are growing on private land just the other side of a wire fence, like bailing water out of a sinking boat. And, meanwhile, the scientists have been working frantically for a solution—and now we’ve got it, if only we can get it to people fast enough. Brothers and Sisters, the people living in crippling fear need to be reminded that Jesus is Lord. The politicians and the technocrats need to be reminded that Jesus is Lord. And everyone who thinks that Science is our saviour needs to be reminded that Jesus is Lord. Healthy fear, good government, and the miracles of science are all good things—but we need to remember that they are gifts of God under the lordship of Jesus.

In our lesson from Acts, St. Luke tells us about Jesus as he led the disciples out of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. He promised them that John’s prophecy would soon be fulfilled. He was going to send his Spirit to baptise them with fire. They didn’t know what that meant. In fact, it didn’t even seem very important to them at the time. They wanted to know about the

kingdom! That’s what the Messiah was about—he was supposed to come and restore the kingdom of Israel. When he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday they were thinking that maybe now he would finally throw off the poor itinerant rabbi disguise and restore the kingdom, throwing out the Romans and taking up David’s throne. But instead Jesus allowed himself to be arrested, beaten, and killed. They were despondent. But then on Sunday he rose from the dead. Maybe *this* was finally it. But through the next forty days Jesus simply taught them the Scriptures. The disciples were excited to have Jesus back with them. They were excited about his resurrection, although they didn’t yet truly understand what it meant. And so there on the Mount of Olives they asked again: Jesus, it’s great you’re alive again. We appreciate all the Bible teaching. But when are you going to bring the kingdom? And in response Jesus once again promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower their witness and then told them that it wasn’t their place to know the times and seasons fixed by the Father. But then Jesus did something amazing: he ascended into the clouds. There were the disciples staring into the sky, probably with their mouths agape, as Jesus disappeared from their sight. And they just stood there, staring and staring until the two men, the two angels, broke into their wonder and amazement saying, “Hey, you men of Galilee! Are you going to stand there forever staring into space? Jesus went up to heaven and he’s coming back. Didn’t he give you something important to do in the meantime?”

What just happened there? Why were they agape, staring into the sky? It wasn’t just that Jesus had done something that no one else had ever done before. No, it was because he did something that anyone who knew the Hebrew scriptures recognised. In our Old Testament lesson from Daniel 7 we read about the one called the son of man. Daniel saw in a vision a sequence of empires...Babylonians,

Persians, Greeks. They were ferocious, destructive, oppressing God’s people. And then they were destroyed and, Daniel says, he saw this one like a son of man—a figure representing the people of God—“with the clouds of heaven...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.”

God’s people had suffered, been defeated, exiled, oppressed and through it all the faithful continued and they cried out to the Lord and Daniel saw their prayers answered in the son of man as he was revealed in glory, as he came on the clouds to take his throne with the ancient of day. Friends, the disciple stood there agape because right there on the Mount of the Ascension, Daniel’s vision had just become a reality. The son of man had ascended to take his throne and that meant—it still means—that despite any appearances to the contrary, despite despotic kings, despite rejection and persecution, despite the ongoing presence of sin and death in the world, Jesus is seated on his throne, Jesus rules, Jesus is Lord.

It is providential that Augustus chose to use the imagery of Caesar ascending into heaven to become a god and that “Caesar is Lord” became the quasi-religious pledge of allegiance to the Roman Empire. I say it’s providential, because what the pagan Romans had been depicting in their imperial iconography for a generation before Jesus, was also struck down that day when Jesus did for real, what the Romans believed Caesar had done symbolically. However much Caesar insisted that he was lord of the world, no matter how hard he pressed those early believers to acknowledge it, to offer him a pinch of incense on the imperial altars, no matter how many he crucified or fed

to the lions, they knew that Jesus had done it for real and they persevered in faith knowing that Jesus is Lord.

Jesus' kingdom is here and now. It's not coming in the future. It's not coming after a rapture of believers. It's not coming before or after or in the middle of a Great Tribulation. And it's not something we have to go to heaven to experience. The disciples asked Jesus when the kingdom was coming and Jesus responded by telling them that it was not for them to know. I think he was smiling as he said that, because the next thing we see is Jesus ascending. Just as the Ascension sends the message loudly and clearly that Jesus is Lord, it also sends the message loudly and clearly that his kingdom is here and now, even if the King's throne is in heaven. They asked him when the kingdom was coming and in response he gave them a dramatic visual that they'd never forget: They saw the King ascend to his throne. Brothers and Sisters, the Ascension of Jesus tells us very dramatically and unmistakably that the kingdom is here and now. Why is the Ascension important? Again, it tells us dramatically and unmistakably that the kingdom is here and now.

All of this is important, but what does it mean that Jesus is reigning and that the kingdom is here and now? For that we need to look at the big picture. In the beginning God created the Cosmos to give him glory. At the centre of it was a garden and in that garden the Lord placed human beings to tend and to keep it. Everything about the garden points to its being the Lord's temple. When the Israelites built the tabernacle, the design was meant to mimic the garden. It was in the garden that human beings lived in the presence of the Lord. And later it was in the temple that the Lord manifested his presence in the holy of holies. The temple was the place where heaven and earth met and where the people went to meet with, to worship, and to fellowship with the

Lord. The temple pointed back to the garden. When humanity sinned, the garden was lost. Adam and Eve were cast out and an angel placed at the entrance to guard it. And from there the story of humanity goes from bad to worse. And yet the Lord never abandoned his Creation. The creation was meant to give God glory and when it turned on him, instead of destroying it, God chose to manifest his glory by renewing it—by making a *new creation*. And as humanity lost all knowledge of the Lord, he called Abraham to himself and through Abraham created a *new* humanity in the family of Abraham. Through Abraham, the Lord began the work of restoring the garden.

And yet think about a garden. You can't plant a garden in the wilderness and expect it to flourish on its own. Enemies and wild animals will raid the garden and steal the fruit. Without cultivation and protection the wild will quickly overcome the garden. And so the Lord provided for the protection of his new garden. He sent Jacob and his family to Egypt, where the king looked on them with favour, provided for them, cared for them, and protected them. When the king of Egypt became hostile, the Lord himself rescued his new creation—Israel—and led her into the wilderness and to the promised land. He fed her in the wilderness and he drove out her enemies from the land. Eventually the Lord gave her a human king to protect his new creation from the wilderness—from the hostile enemies—that surrounded her. But through it all, it was ultimately the Lord who was King and who protected his people. Isaiah declared that “the Lord reigns” when Israel was faced with conquest by the Babylonian empire. The Babylonian king and the Babylonian gods had no power over Israel no matter how bad things got. In Daniel's vision ferocious beasts represent the kingdoms of the earth that had conquered and dominated Israel, but in that vision the Lord takes

the kingdom away from those monsters and delivers it to the saints and ultimately to the son of man—to Jesus. Even when the Lord uses earthly kings to discipline his people, he continues to care for them. That's the purpose of his kingship and his kingdom: the care and cultivation of his new creation.

And all this comes to full fruit in Jesus. He has come as the Son of Man. He has come as the Messiah—the true and eternal king in the line of David. He has come to bring the Lord's new creation to full fruit—to suffer for his people and to give them his Holy Spirit that they might truly be the new creation that Israel was supposed to be—that they might be the true sons and daughters of Abraham. But not only that, he has also come to establish a kingdom over which he will rule himself—a kingdom to protect and to safeguard the new creation—the Lord's garden as it grows and flourishes and spreads throughout the world. This is the story of the book of Acts. We read the beginning today: Jesus ascended into the clouds to take his heavenly throne. Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. The rest of Acts is the story of the church, of the new creation, of the kingdom spreading throughout the world. And Acts ends dramatically with Paul in Rome, in chains, proclaiming the lordship of Jesus right under Caesar's nose. Through the suffering, persecution, and martyrdom of the saints, the kingdom of Jesus has triumphed and will continue to triumph.

Brothers and sisters, we are that new creation. The wilderness has surrounded the Lord's garden. Earthly empires and kings have tried to steal its fruit, they've tried to stamp it out and burn it down, but King Jesus has preserved it. Because of his preservation, past generations have carried the good news that Jesus is Lord from Jerusalem to Samaria and to all the world. Because King Jesus

has preserved it we know and believe that good news here in Canada, half a world away from that mount from which Jesus ascended to his throne two thousand years ago. Because King Jesus continues to preserve his new creation, we can have confidence to go out in faith, to charge into the darkness with the light of Christ, knowing that no matter what happens the kingdom of God is here and now and that nothing will stop it. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, this new creation of which we are a part is protected by the one who has been given all authority and who will reign until every last enemy is put under his feet, even death itself.

Our hope as Christians is in that day. Death is the last enemy to separate earth and heaven and on that day when Jesus finally defeats it, he'll return from his throne on the clouds as the angels told the disciples. As the joyful people of Rome went out to join their triumphant Caesar as he marched into the city as the conquering hero, St. Paul says that the people of Jesus will meet him in the air to accompany him as returns to earth the conquering hero—as he comes accompanied by heaven itself and restores earth and heaven.

Brothers and Sisters, in the Old Testament the temple was the one place on earth where heaven and earth met and where the Lord could be known. When Jesus came he became the temple for us. The amazing thing is that Jesus didn't leave it at that. He sent his Holy Spirit to fill and indwell us. We, his Church, are now the temple. We are now the place where heaven and earth connect and where the Lord is made known. And that's our mission. Carved on our lychgate are those familiar words: "Jesus is Lord". We pass beneath them as we come to the church to meet and to worship, but have you ever thought about what they really mean? The next time you walk under those words remember the Ascension. Remember

that Jesus is seated on his throne, that his kingdom is here and now, and that he has made us his people. We are his army, but not an army like those of Rome sent out to conquer barbarians with the sword. Jesus calls us to charge into the darkness bearing his light, to suffer and even to die for the sake of the lost as we seek to make known his love, his peace, his justice, his mercy, and especially his grace.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in his Ascension you have raised Jesus to the place of kingship and authority. Let us never forget the significance of his rule. As we face the darkness, give us courage to shine his light brightly and to proclaim that he is Lord. Increase our understanding of your love and grace that we might manifest it to hostile world around us. And remind us, Father, to live in the hope of his sure return when all of his enemies have been subjected to his rule. In the meantime, as we wait for the restoration of heaven and earth, let us be faithful representative of your kingdom, making heaven visible and known to all around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Lord. Amen.