



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for Whitsunday

Acts 2:1-11

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Last Sunday we recalled the Ascension of Jesus and remembered its significance—that it offers a powerful visual confirmation of his lordship over creation. And yet many Christians fail to make that connection. For many, the ascension just means that Jesus isn't physically present with us anymore. And I think this has happened because we as the Church have too often neglected to understand the events of Jesus' life and the life of the early Church within the context of the big story of God and his people. When we do that we miss the deeper significance of pretty much everything. For the last century or so, Evangelicalism has been dominated by a theological system that understands Jesus' kingdom essentially to be an entirely future reality. And that leaves the Church spiritually impoverished. Think of our study of Revelation and themes it stresses: tribulation, perseverance, and *kingdom*. But if the kingdom is only a future reality, perseverance in the face of tribulation becomes impossible—or something we must do solely on our own strength. Now Pentecost. Something similar has happened with Pentecost. Not necessarily in the same way, but nevertheless, we've allowed a cheapened view of things to downgrade what Pentecost actually means. In the case of Pentecost, a lot of Christians have turned it into little more than a personal experience. And as much as the reality of Pentecost is a personal experience for us as Christians, when that becomes our main focus, we tend to lose the bigger picture, the big picture of redemption.

So let's back up to the Ascension for a moment to get some perspective before we head into Pentecost. Again, the point of the Ascension is that Jesus has

taken his throne and that he will reign from there until, as St. Paul says, every last enemy is put under his feet—until every enemy of God and his people, of his kingdom and his new creation has been conquered. And if Jesus is reigning, that means that his kingdom is here and his kingdom is now—even if its full consummation is still future. This is what the Old Testament points to throughout its pages. It's what the New Testament affirms about Jesus and his coming and his mission. Kings don't take their thrones without their sovereign rule being inaugurated and that's as true of Jesus as it is for earthly kings.

As I've thought about this I've come to suspect that one of the major reasons we've missed the reality of God's kingdom is that we haven't fully grasped the mission of the Church—of God's new creation here on earth. We pray every day, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," but we never fully grasp just what we're praying in those words. And that's what I want to talk about this morning. And that brings us back to Pentecost. What's the significance of Pentecost? Why is Pentecost important?

The best place to start is our Epistle from Acts 2 this morning. St. Luke tells us there of this amazing thing that took place as the Holy Spirit came in a rush of wind and fell on the disciples in something that looked like tongues of fire. Suddenly they were praising God in other languages. Jews from all over the empire were there and heard these Galilean men telling of the mighty acts of God in their own languages. None of these visitors was quite sure what was going on. Some of them thought the disciples were drunk. And that's when Peter stood up and gave his first sermon. He began with Joel's prophecy as he walked the people through the Old Testament and then explained how Jesus, in his death and resurrection and then in his ascension not only fulfilled those prophecies, but how Jesus actually fulfilled Israel's failed mission. As he says in verse 36, "Therefore let the whole house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

It's an amazing picture Luke gives us, but as we read it we probably missed the really significant little note he gives us right at the beginning. In verse 1 Luke begins by telling us that all this happened "when the day of Pentecost arrived". And we think, "Well, of course...this is why we refer to that day as Pentecost!" What a lot of people don't realise is that it wasn't Luke or the Church that decided to call that day Pentecost. That day was *already* called Pentecost. That's what the Greek-speaking Jews called the day fifty days after Passover—"pente", "fifty". In Hebrew it was called the Feast of Weeks—specifically, seven weeks after Passover. And the connection between this Jewish festival and what happened on that day Luke tells us in Acts when the Spirit descended on the disciples is important.

Passover and Pentecost go all the way back to the beginning of Israel's story in the Exodus. Remember back to the first Passover. The Lord sent his angel to take the lives of the firstborn of all Egypt. But he made a provision to spare the firstborn of Israel. He gave Moses instructions for the people: Each family was to slaughter a lamb. They were to eat the lamb and they were to paint its blood on the doorposts of their home. When the angel of death saw the blood of the sacrificed lamb he would literally "pass over" that home and spare those inside. The next day the Lord led his people out of their bondage in Egypt. He rescued them again as he parted the waters of the Red Sea so that they could escape Pharaoh's army and he led them to Mt. Sinai in the wilderness where he gave them his law. The law he gave to the people through Moses was the charter of his covenant. To be God's people is to manifest his glory and his faithfulness to the world. "On earth as in heaven," as we pray. That was Israel's calling and it had been ever since the Lord had called Abraham: to be a light to the gentiles so that the nations might know the glory of the Lord and be drawn to him. The Lord wrote his law on tablets of stone so that Israel would know what to do to fulfil her mission and ministry—that she would know what it is to live in covenant with the Lord. God rescued

his people, leading them in an exodus from their bondage to the Egyptians and on the *fiftieth* day he met them and gave them his law. That was the origin of the feast of Pentecost. And that was its significance for Israel down through the years. At Passover they remembered how God had rescued them. Year after year they sacrificed lambs and painted the blood on their doorposts to remind them of the way in which the Lord had saved them. And every year, fifty days later they commemorated and celebrated the giving of the law that taught them how to live as the Lord's people.

All of that's packed into that statement Luke makes in Acts 2:1 about the day of Pentecost having come. And that points to the meaning of Pentecost as we remember and celebrate it as Christians. On that last Passover of the Old Covenant era, Jesus went to Jerusalem. He and his friends ate that age old covenant meal in the upper room, but as they did so, Jesus gave it new significance. Now the Passover bread was his body. Now the wine was his blood. The next day, Jesus gave his body and blood for the sins of his people. And on that first Easter morning he rose from the grave, not only conquering sin and death, but leading his people in a new exodus. This time it wasn't an exodus from human slavery, but an exodus from slavery to sin and death and into the new promised land of the long-awaited age to come.

For forty days Jesus taught his people from the Law and the Prophets, showing them all these connections. He gave his people a new mission. And yet it wasn't a completely new mission. It was the same mission that Israel had had all along: to manifest the glory of the Lord to the nations and to call them into covenant with him. But this time the Lord was equipping his people as he never had before. He had promised through the prophet Ezekiel: "I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). This is what humanity needed all along. The law was external—written on stone

tablets. What humanity needed was a new heart, a new life, given and made possible by the indwelling Spirit of God. And so, at his ascension, Jesus gave his disciples their mission: go out into the world, proclaim the good news—the message that Jesus is Lord, that there is a new and eternal King, make disciples of the nations, and baptise them into the God who loves and redeems his rebellious people. Once again, "On earth as it is in heaven." But this is also why he told them to go to Jerusalem and wait. The exodus made Israel God's people. In fact, we see throughout the Old Testament that it was in the Exodus that the Lord adopted Israel and called her his firstborn. But being adopted is different from being given the tools needed to actually live as part of the family and to carry out the mission.

Think about that. Imagine being adopted into a family, but not being told the house rules or the family expectations. That was what Israel needed to *live* the Lord's adoption. And that's the purpose that the law served when it was given at Sinai. It was the family rules. And just so with Jesus' disciples. Jesus is now the Lord's firstborn. He has taken Israel's role on himself and as we pass through the waters of baptism in faith—our own Red Sea experience—we are adopted as Jesus' brothers and sisters into the Lord's family. But we need to be equipped to live as members of the Lord's family. And so, on the fiftieth day after their exodus, after their rescue from slavery to sin and death, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to his people. Instead of external tablets of stone, he gave his life-giving and empowering Spirit to breathe life into his sons and daughters that they—that *we*—might truly live as his people, as his family. Instead of an external law pointing us to God, God comes to us himself, pours himself into us, and turns our hearts to him. "On earth as it is in heaven."

That day was a commissioning too. Pentecost mirrors Jesus' own baptism. Think back to the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry. He was baptised by John and as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan River the Holy

Spirit descended on him and the Lord spoke from heaven: This is my beloved Son; in him I am well-pleased. At Pentecost the Lord did the same thing for the Church. He sent his Spirit not only to indwell us, but to commission us to carry out the mission that Jesus began. On Pentecost the Lord declared to his Church, to all those who are in Christ: These are my beloved sons and daughters; in them I am well-pleased. And as Jesus was sent from his baptism into the wilderness to suffer Satan's harassment and to triumph over him in the power of the Spirit, so from our baptism at Pentecost, the Church is sent out into the wilderness: to charge into the darkness with the light of Christ, to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord and that he has conquered sin and death and Satan. We're not called to go timidly into the world to offer people a new option on the smorgasbord of world religions. No, we're to charge into the territory of Satan and of Caesar to proclaim that there is a new Lord, that the kingdoms and systems of this old age are coming to an end and that Jesus is Lord. In Jesus and then in the Church, heaven and earth are coming back together, the fracture caused by our rebellion is being healed, all things are being made new, and this corrupt and broken world is being set to rights under the power and authority of the King. Our message is one that we should be proclaiming not with timidity and fear, but with power and authority. Ascension and Pentecost give us the assurance we need that Jesus reigns, that his kingdom is here and now, and that however bad things may look today, he will with absolute certainty subdue every enemy and return on the clouds the conquering king at the end of the age.

No matter how bad things look. No matter how bad things get. As we've seen in the message of Revelation, there's no reason to be afraid. There's no reason *not* to have confidence in our mission. Ascension and Pentecost should be reminders of that. Last week we sang those words of the old hymn "See the Conqueror":

*Thou hast raised our human nature*

*In the clouds to God's right hand  
There we sit in heavenly places  
There with Thee in glory stand*

*Jesus reigns adorned by angels  
Man with God is on the throne  
Mighty Lord in Thine ascension  
We by faith behold our own  
We by faith behold our own*

In his Ascension Jesus gives us assurance. He in his resurrected and exalted humanity has raised our humanity and this earthly realm to heaven. That's one half of his final promise to restore heaven and earth. And Pentecost embodies the other half of the promise: In sending the gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell his people, the Lord has sent heaven to earth. Humanity has risen to heaven with Jesus and heaven has descended to earth with the Holy Spirit and so we know that heaven and earth cannot remain sundered and separated forever. One day they will be restored. All that remains is for Jesus to subdue his enemies.

In the meantime, Brothers and Sisters, we the Church have been made the temple of the living God. Think about what that means. In the beginning God created a garden temple where he and his people lived in fellowship with each other. Human beings lived in the presence of God. Our sin broke that fellowship. Sin and death drove us from the garden. Sin and death forced apart earth and heaven. The tabernacle and the temple were built as models of that garden temple in miniature. They became the centre of Israel's life, because in the temple God and human beings could find fellowship, even if it was a limited and broken fellowship. Then Jesus came and he became the temple himself. In his incarnation he united humanity to God and in giving his Spirit to us, to the Church, the Lord has made us his living temple. In us, thanks to Pentecost, God is made known to fallen and broken humanity. In us the new creation has begun. And in us the Lord is working to restore his fallen and broken world to himself. As ancient Israel caught a glimpse of heaven in the temple, so the world is meant to catch a

glimpse of heaven in us, in the Church—a view of humanity and God once again set to rights through the mediating work of Jesus.

And how do we do that? Brothers and Sisters, just as Israel was given a new set of “family rules” to show her how to be light in the darkness, we as God's new Israel have been given the same. Not a legalistic set of dos and don'ts—although it does certainly involve that—but a call to live the law of love exemplified first in the Lord's relationship with Israel and then brought to full fruit in the ministry of Jesus. We're called to manifest faith and to manifest hope and, most of all, to manifest love to a world with no faith and no hope, to a world filled with fear and hate. We're called to live out the manifesto, the charter given by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: hungering and thirsting for righteousness, showing mercy, making peace. We're called to show the world that Jesus has given us a new way of living. In fact, it's not a new way. It's the old way that was lost when we fell into rebellion and sin, but now it's back and it's possible because this time it's not just a set of rules carved on stone; it's a new being and a new life imparted to our hearts by the very Spirit of God living in us and giving us his new life.

Brothers and Sisters, there's an awful tendency to forget all of this when we turn Pentecost into a private experience as often happens. Pentecost is about the people of God being equipped by the Spirit to live as his people, not just privately, but publicly—not for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of the world. Pentecost is about the Spirit bearing fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, it's about the people of God being changed and renewed in our hearts that we might proclaim that Jesus is Lord. And we do all this as heralds of his kingdom, proclaiming its good news. That's the idea of “gospel” or “good news”. The New Testament brings together two meanings in that word meaning “good news”. For the Jews “good news” brought to mind the

language of Isaiah. “Good news” meant a messenger coming to a people languishing in exile; a messenger sent to tell them that their enemies had been defeated and that the Lord had returned to Zion. To Greeks and Romans, “good news” brought to mind an imperial herald, sent to the far reaches of the empire with the message that a new Caesar had ascended to the throne. In Jesus both of those meanings are brought together. In Jesus we have a new and eternal King; in Jesus the Lord has returned to Zion to dwell in the midst of his people. The power of Pentecost is the power and life of the Spirit given to us to proclaim his kingdom and to live it before the eyes of the world. “On earth as it is in heaven.”

Let us pray: O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*