

Sermon for Ascension

Text: Luke 24:50, 51

He (Jesus) led them (the disciples) out of the city as far as Bethany, where he raised his hands and blessed them. As he was blessing them, he departed from them and was taken up into heaven.

Jesus blesses

The celebration of the ascension of Jesus is a very old festival in the church; one that goes back to at least fourth century, maybe even earlier. It was considered as important as Christmas and Easter as the celebration of the completion of Jesus' work of salvation. The risen Jesus had given his final instructions to his disciples about what they were to do and how they were to continue the work he had begun. He had filled in the blanks about God becoming human, his death on a cross and his resurrection and indicated that he must return to the Father and take up all power and authority as the King of kings and sit at the right hand of God the Father and rule heaven and earth and beyond.

The church father St Augustine expressed his opinion about Ascension Day like this:

"This is that festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing...and his Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless." It's a pity that Ascension Day for most people passes without any thought.

So let's consider it today. Jesus led the disciples out to the vicinity of Bethany; he raised his arms and blessed them. Jesus is concluding his resurrection appearances and is returning to heaven and entering his glory, to be exalted and enthroned at God's right hand.

As Paul says so well, God *"raised Christ from death and seated him at the right-hand side in the heavenly world. Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers and lords; he has a title far superior to all titles of authority in this world and the next. And, so in honour of the name of Jesus all beings in heaven, on earth and in the world below will fall on their knees, and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Eph 1:20,21; Phil 2:9-11).*

Luke tells us that as Jesus was being taken up into heaven *"he lifted up his hands and blessed them"*. This action of lifting up one's arms in blessing was and still is very important. Jesus was doing what the Old Testament priests had done over the people of Israel for centuries as they

came out of the temple on special feast occasions, and what Christian pastors and priests still do today at the conclusion of every worship service.

Jesus raises his hands and sends the disciples out with his blessing. In Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus sending out his disciples with this command "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*"

And now just before his ascension, Jesus says, "*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*"

What an assignment! And what made it worse is that they were to be witnesses in a world that was hostile and totally pagan. They were to baptise and teach in a society that worshipped idols and emperors and had no idea of the grace and mercy of God. We know from the New Testament and from history that the disciples and the early Christians suffered terribly as they carried out this command. But Jesus raises his arms and blesses them saying, "*I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matt 28:19-20).

As the disciples fanned out from Jerusalem into the rest of the world, their Lord went with them every step of the way. He walked with Peter along the hot and dusty roads of Judea. At the same time, their Lord accompanied Thomas perhaps as far as India, and went with James who became the head of the church in Jerusalem and some sources say he went as far as Spain. Their Lord went with Paul as he travelled from city to city going as far as Rome. He went with John who was exiled to an island because of his faith. When the going got tough and their lives were at risk, I'm sure they recalled the ascending Jesus with his hands raised and blessing them. Those raised hands and Jesus' blessing assured them that his presence was with them at every time and every place, even though they were not able to see him physically.

The last act in our worship service is the blessing. The pastor raises his hands and pronounces the blessing that God gave to his people in the Old Testament: "*The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord look upon you with his favour and give you peace*" (Numbers 6:24-26). We are sent out from the worship service into our everyday lives with the blessing of God. Just as the disciples were blessed by Jesus as he sent them out and assured them of his presence during their walk through life, we also can have this same assurance.

This blessing is something that is real and effective. To be blessed means that we have the power and authority of the one who sits on the throne on our side. Christ who *“rules above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords”*, *“who is the supreme Lord over all things”*; *“the one whom God has raised to the highest place above and given the name that is the greater than any other name”*—it is this Christ who holds all power and authority who blesses us and promises his presence in our lives to the end of the world.

On Ascension Day we are reminded that the Lord has his arms of blessing raised over us. We can think of this in a personal way. Just as each disciple faced perils and dangers wondering if they would come out of them alive, we too face lingering sicknesses—a life-changing accident, the threat of death or grief over a loss, loss of income, family strife, pressures that seem all too heavy to bear, and the weight that all these bear down on us.

Again, like the disciples we are led to turn toward the ascended Jesus, the King of kings, with his nail pierced hands of blessing raised over us. *“I am with you always...”* he promises. *“I am with you...”* – what a wonderful promise.

But you know as well as I do that we often forget this promise. We fret and worry, we become frightened and unsure simply because we fail to take Jesus at his word when he said, *“I am with you always ...”*

Think of the disciples caught out in a storm, waves spilling over the side of their boat, the wind howling, the disciples panic stricken, fearing they would soon drown. While all this is happening, Jesus is asleep in the boat on a pillow. Seeing Jesus sleeping was the picture of peace. What a contrast to the panicky and fear-filled disciples. They woke him and said, *“Don’t you care that we are about to die?”* Jesus stood up and spoke to the wind and waves and everything became calm. Then Jesus said to his disciples, *“Why are you frightened? Do you still have no faith?”* (Mark 4:35-41).

That’s us in the boat—struggling against all the things that are against us. And we forget that there he is in the middle of all our trouble and anxiety—with us. *“I am with you always,”* he said. Jesus won’t let us down. He says to us also, *“Do you still have no faith?”*

Jesus blesses us as we seek to serve him. Jesus raised his hands as he blessed his disciples as they began to serve their Lord and Saviour not knowing what all that would involve. I’m sure there were times when they wondered why Jesus had called them of all people to certain tasks, why

so many hardships and such opposition, why so much controversy and disagreements among people—read the New Testament letters and you soon get an idea of the wide variety of challenges that confronted the apostles as they carried out Jesus' commission to be witnesses. Looking back to the day they saw Jesus raise his hands of blessings over them as he ascended and hearing his words echoing in their heads, "*Be my witnesses; I will fill you with the Holy Spirit; I will be with you always to the end of the age*" reassured and encouraged them with the knowledge that the Lord of lords and King of kings will give them the strength to endure what would otherwise be impossible to bear.

At the end of each Sunday service as we leave here Jesus speaks his words of blessings over us. In fact, it never seems quite right when a worship service doesn't finish with his words of blessing over his church. We are being sent out not only to face our own personal challenges, but we are being sent out as the church, Jesus' disciples, to be the love of Christ in the lives of the people we meet in our week. He has given us the responsibility to let the light of Christ shine through us, whether through our words that reflect God's Word of hope and comfort and love clearly and unmistakably, or through our actions that demonstrate the love of Christ and make a difference in the lives of other people.

God has given this congregation a special mission. He has called us together for the purpose of carrying out his command to "*be witnesses*". And there is no getting away from the fact that he is saying to us, "*You shall be my witnesses*" with a special emphasis on the word "*shall*". He is being very definite. It is our calling. It's what it means to be a disciple—to share the love of Jesus in whatever way we can and to support one another as we seek to *be witnesses*.

We aren't always going to be successful; we aren't going to find it easy; Jesus didn't promise that it would be. But he does raise his arms over us as he raised his arms over the disciples when he ascended to heaven. He blesses us with the certainty that even though it might be hard at times his presence will give us strength and the Holy Spirit will provide the results. Today again he raises his hands of blessing over us as we venture out to be his disciples, his church in the world. Amen.