Sunday 21 May 2023

The Ascension

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General Comments

In this service I have tried to retain a strand of the traditional understanding of the Ascension and its significance in terms of Jesus being the Risen and Ascended King; however, I wanted the service to reflect the Ascension is also end of Jesus’ journey of incarnation. We mark Jesus’ conception in Advent, His birth at Christmas, His Baptism early in the year, the beginning of His ministry at the start of Lent, His death on Good Friday, and His Resurrection at Easter. The Ascension is the end of Jesus’ human journey on earth. The Ascension is often seen as mystical event, but I like to look at in terms of our human experience: there are three strands I have sought to draw out from the theme and readings: the human experience of saying farewell to a loved one; our experience of the ascended Jesus, no longer a presence on Earth; and the awesomeness that Jesus, both fully divine **and fully human**, is in heaven.

Call to Worship

*This has been written as a paraphrase of selected verses from Psalm 118 into the context of the continued Easter season which lasts until Pentecost next week!*

Jesus is risen. Hallelujah! **Jesus is risen, indeed. Hallelujah!**

This is the day the Lord has made! **We will rejoice and be glad in it!**

The Lord is our strength and our song! **You are our God, and we will praise You!**

The Lord has become our victory! **You are our God,**

**and we will proclaim Your name.**

Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good! **God’s faithful love endures forever!**

Prayer of Approach

*Let us pray…*

Loving God, infinite and eternal in wisdom, power and love:

we praise you for all that you are,

and for all that you do for the world.

You have shown us your truth and your love in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Help us by your Spirit to worship you in spirit and in truth;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*URC Worship Book, 4th Order for Communion.*

Prayer of Confession

*Words of introduction:*

We bring to God the times when we have failed to love others,

failed to love God, and even failed to love ourselves.

*To the bidding, “Merciful God…” please respond with, “****Graciously hear us.”***

God of justice and forgiveness,

we confess that we live in a world in which many are hungry - even for bread,

many are sad or hurt, and there is much that is unfair and unjust…

Merciful God…**Graciously hear us.**

We confess that, in our own lives, we do not always do what is right

or turn away from what is wrong….

Merciful God…**Graciously hear us.**

We ask your forgiveness, we claim your love and mercy,

and we ask for courage to make a new beginning…

Merciful God…**Graciously hear us.**

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*URC Worship Book, 2nd order for Communion.*

Assurance of Pardon

*It is a very human trait to perpetuate the guilt we feel. It is important for us to hear again and again the merciful nature of God, that in Jesus, we are forgiven.*

Listen for the assurance of pardon, as found in Psalm 103.

“The Lord is tender and kind. God is gracious.

 The Lord is slow to get angry. God is full of love.

The Lord loves those who have respect for God’s ways.

 The Lord’s love is as high as the heavens are above the earth.

God has removed our sins from us.

 The Lord has removed them as far as the east is from the west.”

*Psalm 103, verses 8, 11-12*

Introductory Talk / Children’s Address

*Some ideas and thoughts which introduce the idea of choices, and maybe these might inform a discussion in your congregation.*

* You may wish to find images for the following…
	+ People saying goodbye – leaving the house, at the school gate, at the train-station or airport. Think about these times. Are there particular things you always say or do? Why do you choose to say or do those things?
	+ Life moving on – going to a new school, moving away to university, leaving home, moving to a new area (or even a new country). What do those things feel like? What do you think it feels like for those left behind?
	+ Someone new, because someone has left – a new class-teacher, a new boss, a new neighbour. How does it feel when we encounter the unfamiliar and unknown?
	+ How do you think it felt for the Disciples when Jesus left them and ascended?
* How do we know that someone still thinks about us and loves us, even when we are separated from them? What do we do? What does the other person do? (Many answers will mention electronic communication. It would be interesting to see how quickly the answer comes that we pray for those from whom we are separated.)

Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, Your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

You are our hiding-place and our shield: we hope in Your word.

May our cry come before you: give us understanding according to Your word.

May we listen, and may You speak to us. Amen.

*based on Psalm 119:105,114,169.*

The Lectionary Readings

I have often felt that the Ascension is a somewhat neglected in our calendar, probably because the day itself falls on a Thursday, so I have chosen the Lectionary reading for the Ascension Day itself, rather than for the 7th Sunday of Easter.

* There are two accounts in the New Testament of the Ascension, believed to be written by the same author – of Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.
* Acts 1:1-11, the opening verses of the book. The themes in the reading may be summarised:
	+ vv.1-2 - Referring back to the author’s first book (Luke’s Gospel).
	+ v.3 – Non-specific references to Jesus’ Resurrection appearances.
	+ vv.4-8 – The promise of the Holy Spirit.
	+ vv.7-11 – The Disciples’ last earthly encounter with the Risen Christ.
	+ v.6 – The Disciples continue in their thinking of an earthly political restoration of Israel.
	+ v.7 – Jesus speaks about us not having a dated foreknowledge of future time.
	+ v.9 – The Ascension of Jesus into heaven.
	+ vv.10-11 – “men in white”, considered to be angels redirect the Disciples’ focus from looking into the sky back to earth.
* An alternative reading for Ascension is the account at the end of Luke’s Gospel, Luke 24:44-53. This is a different, shorter account. You may wish to include this as a first reading.
	+ Jesus is speaking to the Disciples in the wider context of Resurrection appearances which are a very short version of those in John 20 and John 21.
	+ vv.44-46 – Jesus is the fulfilment to prophecy
	+ vv.47-48 – Jesus speaks about the continuation of His work carried out in His name.
	+ v.49 – The promise of the Holy Spirit.
	+ v.50 – We are given a geographical location of the Ascension.
	+ vv.51-52 – The Ascension of Jesus. There is no mention of angels redirecting the Disciples: they return joyfully to Jerusalem.
* The two set Psalms for Ascension are Psalm 47 and Psalm 93:
	+ Psalm 47 – a song of praise beginning “Clap your hands!” and praise is the theme which runs through it. It alludes to the Ascension (v.5 – “God went up to his throne”) and that God is “King of the whole earth” (v.7). It finishes with the joining together of all nations (v.9). The focus in this Psalm is about human response to God’s gracious actions.
	+ Psalm 93 – The focus is different in this Psalm, looking instead on the timelessness and surety of God manifested and witnessed in creation.
* There is an epistle reading from Ephesians 1:15-23:
	+ vv.15-18 - The writer (considered to be Paul) is giving general thanks for the young church in Ephesus and prays for them.
	+ v.19 – This verse bridges Paul’s prayer and hopes for the Ephesians with short summary of God’s actions.
	+ vv.20-23 – The writer summarises the Resurrection, the Ascension, God’s sovereignty overall and that we – the church – are God’s manifest presence in the world.
* Additionally, I have selected two short passages from the Old Testament which put into context Jesus’ Ascension from the top of a hill and being taken into heaven:
	+ Deuteronomy 34 – Moses climbed Mount Nebo, where he died and God buried him. Moses’ earthly journey ended, just as Jesus’ earthly time came to an end. There is a parallel between these great prophetic voices. Just as the Israelites continued in their journey, the Disciples continue their journey and begin the church.
	+ 2 Kings 2 – Elijah is taken into heaven by the chariot of fire. Elisha (Elijah’s closest disciple) is offered a gift from God through Elijah. There is a parallel here with Jesus’ Disciples going down the from the Ascension and receiving the Holy Spirit and went on to do great things, just as Elisha received “a double share”.

Sermon Notes

These initial points put the Ascension into its context:

* The Easter season lasts from Easter Sunday to Pentecost, a period of 50 days; the Ascension takes place 40 days after the Resurrection.
* As we read in all the Gospels, there are often references back to events recorded in the Old Testament books. These would have been obvious to Jesus’ disciples at the time.
* Moses did not enter the ‘promised land’; he died on Mount Nebo which overlooks the Jordan river valley after he had handed over the leadership to Joshua. The Ascension accounts in both Luke and Acts have Jesus handing over to the disciples the leadership of the faith movement which became the Church.
* In Jesus’ final words to His Disciples, He tells them of a gift whom they are about to receive – the Holy Spirit. There is another Old Testament parallel here with Elijah passing on his ministry to Elisha, to whom God gifted a “double portion” of the Spirit.

How can we understand the Ascension for us today?

* The suggested questions above in the Introduction/Children’s Talk above are aimed to lead into us thinking about the human aspect of the Ascension and how it affected the Disciples.
* How do we feel when our world is turned upside-down by events? The people in our lives move on for many different reasons: some of these are sad or tragic, for example, with death and illness. Others move on because they are beginning a new chapter to their lives. The well-known composer of many musicals Stephen Schwartz wrote a song called “The Hardest Part of Love”:

​ *But you cannot close the acorn once the oak begins to grow,*

*​ And you cannot close your heart to what it fears and needs to know*

*​ That the hardest part of love, and the rarest part of love,*

*​ And the truest part of love… is the letting go.*

* Times have changed. When our family and friends move to far-away places, these days we can very easily stay in contact with modern communication technology, but it is in our living memory when staying in touch meant letter-writing by airmail and rare long-distance visits.
* I would like to suggest the following analogy that Jesus’ presence remains with us, despite His Ascension, hidden from our sight. We build TV transmitters on high hills which are often covered in cloud. Just because we can’t see the hill or the transmitter, we can still receive the TV programmes.

The Ascension brings Jesus’ incarnation to a close:

* Throughout the Gospels and the accounts of Jesus’ incarnation – His life on earth as a human-being – we see our understanding being nudged onwards by the appearance of angels (“men in white”) – at His conception, birth, baptism, transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension. At each event, our human understanding of who Jesus is takes another step forward.
* The early Church struggled to understand the nature of God (three persons of the Trinity). One aspect of this was Jesus being wholly human and wholly divine. At Christmas, we know Jesus as Immanuel (God-with-us). Throughout His time on earth, we see Jesus living a human life.
* At the end of Jesus’ incarnation, He went into heaven. If we say that Jesus is human, then a human-being entered heaven at the Ascension. And because Jesus did, we can too!

Affirmation of Faith

*Both the Apostles and Nicene creeds mention Jesus’ Ascension into heaven. I would recommend a sung response to this element of our shared faith, for which there are many possibilities.*

Prayers of Concern

*These prayers are written with the thought of wholeness in God linking them together, just as Jesus incarnational journey was made whole – made complete – in His Ascension. The URC Daily Devotions team also publish weekly prayers which are more ‘of the moment’.*

*At the bidding, “*God of wholeness, hear our prayer...”, please respond with,

“**Come in grace and mercy”.**

Risen Lord, Prince of Peace, we despair when we see war and conflict.

We cry out to You for the people whose lives are broken and torn apart by violence.

We pray for the peacemakers.

God of wholeness, hear our prayer... **Come in grace and mercy.**

Risen Lord, born in a lowly stable and whose parents fled to Egypt in fear of their lives, we pray for refugees and asylum seekers: for those fleeing war,

for those escaping injustice and persecution.

We pray for those stand alongside others.

God of wholeness, hear our prayer... **Come in grace and mercy.**

Risen Lord, we despair when we see Your church divided.

We cry out to you when some churches deny your love to others.

We rejoice when Your love touches the hearts of many.

We pray for our United Reformed Church.

We give thanks for and ask your blessing on those taking the first steps in faith…

God of wholeness, hear our prayer... **Come in grace and mercy.**

Risen Lord, we despair when we see those whom we love are in pain.

We cry out to You for healing.

We rejoice when they again know peace.

In a moment of silence, we pray for those known to us who need Your gentle touch.

*pause*

God of wholeness, hear our prayer... **Come in grace and mercy.**

Risen Lord, we pray for ourselves…

pause

God of wholeness, hear our prayer... **Come in grace and mercy.**

The Lord’s Prayer

*Not everyone who comes into our churches knows the words of this prayer. Please do not assume that they do. Please consider putting this prayer on your service sheet or on the projection screen.*

Blessing and Benediction

*To finish the service, you may wish to use these words of Scripture and/or sing a blessing to one another.*

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn His smile towards you and give you peace. Amen.

*John 14:27; Numbers 6:24-26*

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  |  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| *Opening* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Hail The Day That Sees Him Rise | 252 |  | 300 | 202 |
|  | The Head That Once Was Crowned With Thorns | 257 | 438 | 312 | 647 |
|  | At The Name of Jesus | 261 | 458 | 317 | 41 |
|  | Crown Him With Many Crowns | 262 | 109 | 347 | 459 |
|  | All Hail The Power of Jesus’ Name |  | 457 | 342 | 13 |
| *After confession* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Christ Is Our Light, The Bright And Morning Star |  | 336 |  |  |
|  | Longing For Light |  | 543 | 706 | 1201 |
|  | Light Of The World |  |  | 174 | 1086 |
|  | Shine, Jesus Shine |  | 448 | 59 | 445 |
|  | Be Thou My Vision | 489 | 465 | 545 | 51 |
| *Affirmation of Faith* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | We Believe In God The Father |  |  | 764 | 720 |
|  | I Believe in Jesus |  |  |  | 264 |
|  | In Christ Alone |  |  | 351 | 1072 |
|  | He Is Lord, He Is Lord |  | 443 | 348 | 220 |
|  | Alleluia, Sing To Jesus |  | 445 | 568 | 207 |
| *Closing* |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | O Jesus, I Have Promised\* | 508 | 644 | 563 | 501 |
|  | I Cannot Tell | 265 |  | 350 | 266 |
|  | And Can It Be | 366 | 396 | 34 | 33 |
|  | Jesus Is The Name We Honour |  | 481 | 354 | 870 |
|  | Meekness And Majesty |  | 356 | 362 | 465 |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP- *Mission Praise*

\* A brave congregation might like to try this to the Muppet Show tune…

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHqpaG_HOqg&ab_channel=HornseyMoravian>

You may also like…

*I Believe In God The Father* – The Apostles’ Creed set to Genevan 42 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKRJawdJqXM&ab_channel=CentralPresbyterianChurchofDenver>

The Lord Bless You And Keep You –John Rutter arranged Bobby Goulder (one-man choir). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5C0Zg5C2Us&ab_channel=BobbyGoulder>