

The Ascension

*Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin, Ascension Day, 12 May 2024
Acts 1:1–11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1: 15–23; Mark 16:15–20*

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I wonder what you think of when Ascension Day is mentioned. Unless you are extremely new to Christianity, I am sure you will tell me that it is the day when Jesus ascended into heaven. But - so what?

I remember many years ago when I was a very young priest I had the task of preaching on Ascension Day at the cathedral. I found the task to be quite daunting. During my preparation, my neighbour from across the road came to ask to borrow something and while doing so, she asked me what I was doing. "I'm writing a sermon about Jesus' ascension into heaven", I replied. To which she asked, "What possible relevance has that got for people today?"

Not a bad question to put a young priest on the spot!

So, I ask *you*. What possible relevance has the ascension of Jesus got for people in 2024?

I want to suggest that there are five very important ways in which Jesus' ascension is relevant to people today, just as it was on the day of his ascension over 2000 years ago.

First, continued intercession

Jesus' ascension assures us of his ongoing intercession on our behalf. Paul reminds us in Romans 8: 34,

Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

How wonderful it is to know that the Lord Jesus is in heaven where he prays for you and me. Do you ever feel so burdened, so worried, so low, so depressed, so sick perhaps, that you cannot even find words to pray? In such times Jesus is praying for you, bringing your needs to the Father who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Second, the presence of the Holy Spirit

In John 16:7, Jesus tells his disciples,

'But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.'

On several occasions Jesus explained to his friends that he had to go away in order to send the Holy Spirit who would be their comforter, advocate, teacher, and guide. Jesus' bodily presence on earth is no more. But he has not left us without a Godly comforter, friend, advocate, and guide. On the day of his ascension, Jesus said: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;..." (Acts 1:8). Because Jesus has ascended to heaven, he has sent the Holy Spirit to us, who is with us always, every day. Even when we may feel he is far from us, he is with us, and will never leave us or forsake us.

Third, the assurance of Jesus' return

As we read in our first reading this morning in Acts 1:11, as the disciples were looking into heaven as Jesus ascended, two angels appeared and said to them:

'This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

We declare it every Sunday when we worship in Holy Communion. 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ *will come again!*' This is our hope and assurance. Jesus has ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us with room for all. He *will come again* to take us to himself, that where he is, there we will be also.

Fourth, Jesus' Ascension established His authority

Ephesians 1:20–22 declares,

'[God] raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.'

When Jesus ascended into heaven he sat down at the right hand of the Father and has authority over all things in heaven and earth.

He is the one who is in control.

At times we may feel that we have lost control. Our life may feel totally out of control. We may feel that we have lost our way. Fear not! Jesus is in control and has promised to lead and to guide us through the most difficult situations. He is Lord of all, he is always with us, and he prays constantly for us.

Fifth, the Mission of the Church was given at the Ascension

Before ascending, Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18–20):

‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8)

In Matthew 28, Matthew records Jesus words to his disciples just prior to ascending to heaven:

‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28: 19–20)

Go into all the world and share Jesus’ commandment to love. This is our commission, just as it was the commission to the first disciples.

As the people of South Darebin, how do we share the good news about Jesus with the people in our community?

Is it enough to just come along to church week by week and worship in the confines of these four walls? Are we sharing the good news in the most effective way possible? It’s all very well for us to acknowledge the importance of the ascension to our faith, but are we *acting* on Jesus’ commission in the best way possible?

This is a most important question, and not an easy one to answer. But I want to urge you to consider it, discuss it, pray about it, so that *together* we can ensure that the wonderful news that we have is truly proclaimed to those we meet and know in a manner that is understood.

Amen.