

Sunday After Ascension Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

The Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is part and parcel of his resurrection, and these are the logical and necessary consequence of his willing and sinless death on the Cross, and the vindication and evidence of his divinity.

The Gospel of our Lord's Ascension is that our humanity has a new home and end, including flesh and blood and soul and spirit, in the heaven of God. The end of all things is at hand, and we celebrate this new end of all things in Jesus Christ, the ascended Lord. Our end is not in fear and guilt, not in shame and death, but in life and glory, in love and forgiveness.

As our Collect puts it, we hope and expect to be exalted to the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before.

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I want to bring before you three of the seven words from the cross, which may help us to see the connection between Christ's death and ascension, and between our receiving the benefit of his sacrifice for us, and our hope of sharing in his ascension.

1. We speak of Jesus Christ sitting on the right hand of the Father. This is the Son's rightful place, but now it is also the place of our humanity, where we shall be as the adopted and redeemed children of God. We speak of Jesus as seated, for this is a sign of his completed work. Christ sits in heaven, for his work - our redemption - is complete. As the prayer book puts it, "He offered himself once a full, perfect, sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." As Jesus spoke from the Cross, It is finished. So Ascension is a celebration of that finished work of Christ for us and for our salvation. It is finished.

Alleluia!

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2. We also speak of Jesus in heaven as our Intercessor and our Advocate with the Father. He presents himself and his sacrifice in heaven to the Father for us, and so we represent him and his sacrifice for us on earth in this Eucharist. And as he pleads his sacrifice for us in heaven, so we plead the same here on earth, one with our Ascended Lord, the earthly body one with its heavenly head. Jesus said from the Cross, “Father, forgive them.” This is his eternal prayer, and we pray for the same on earth as in heaven. The fruit of his finished work is, first of all, the forgiveness of sins. We are and can only be forgiven because Christ died for our sins. He was condemned that we might be forgiven. This is the Good News that we are commissioned to spread: the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. “Father, forgive them.” This is our prayer, and this is our message.

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3. Finally, we speak of Jesus ascending into heaven to make a way and to prepare a place for us. He himself said, “I go to prepare a place for you,” and Saint Peter speaks of an inheritance reserved in heaven for you. So it is, that on the cross, Jesus himself spoke of the fruit of that tree, when he promised to the penitent thief and to all who turn to him in penitence and faith, today, “thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” The restoration of everlasting life to humanity is possible because, and only because, Christ died. When Christ ascends, it is the return home of the Son. But in him and with him, we find our new home in the Father’s house. He died that we might live, and the promise of the cross is: you will be with me in Paradise.

The finished work of Jesus Christ is his death, resurrection and ascension, and by faith in him, we may receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

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In today's Epistle, Saint Peter speaks about how those who wait for the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ should live. We, who know the end of all things in Christ, should live lives of self-discipline: "be ye therefore sober, and lives always looking to the Lord, watch unto prayer." In our relationships with one another, Peter makes charity the first priority. Above all things, have fervent charity among yourselves. For just as those who are generous in forgiving shall be forgiven, so the loving are beloved, for the measure you give will be the measure you get, for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. What Peter describes there, is the spirit of generosity towards each other. Charitable and Hospitable - these describe a generosity of heart and home. And Peter broadens this: "whatever gift each has received, minister the same one to another, as stewards of the manifold grace of God." We are stewards of the manifold grace of God, caretakers of God's wide and saving

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generosity. We share the gifts we have received, and supremely that is the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus' name.

In our Gospel, our Lord promises that he will send the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from him and the Father, to his disciples. "And ye also shall bear witness," he says. Jesus uses exactly the same term to describe the work of the Spirit and the work of the disciples: testify or bear witness.

We are given today two criteria, by which to judge ourselves and our congregation. 1. Do we have Fervent Charity among ourselves? And 2. Are we witnesses, testifying of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again and ascended into heaven, and preaching forgiveness and life to all in his name? But let's get real. We are often silent witnesses and tight-fisted stewards. Instead of generous stewards and bold witnesses, we are mean-spirited and cowardly.

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Now, Saint Peter talks about doing all this without grudging. The Greek word is disgusting, gongousmou, and it means “grumbling” or “complaining.” We are to live with each other without grudging or complaining. How tragic it is, when as Christians we forget the essence of the Gospel - reconciliation and forgiveness - and deceive ourselves with false justifications for our grudges. Leviticus 19.18 says, “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any **grudge** against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I *am* the LORD.” And James 5.9 says, “**Grudge** not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.”

Now we need to recall that the Apostles were a dismal failure in both of these, in bickering and backbiting. Fervent charity among yourselves is not what first comes to my mind, as they are portrayed in the Gospel. Denying at worst, silent at best, and hiding behind

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locked doors, they don't look or sound like great witnesses. What changed them, and what can change us and our fellowship, is the gift and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Church in its inner relating is to be distinguished by this: fervent charity. The Church in its outward relating, to the world, is to be witnesses.

The distinguishing mark of the Church is this charity. Jesus said, "By this everyone will recognize you as my disciples, because you love one another." The distinguishing mark of the Church is its witness, the witness it bears to Jesus Christ the Son of the living God. "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the **witness** in himself, for our witness is but that of the Holy Spirit in us and through us and our love for one another is but that of the Holy Spirit in us and through us."

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The generosity and the witness described - that grace and boldness - these are only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We ought not to be surprised by our failures, but rather learn again our need for and dependence upon God's grace. And so these days are dedicated to prayer, these nine days of prayer, of waiting in prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“Have fervent charity among yourselves, and ye also shall bear witness.” Amen.