

The Ascension and us

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 17th May 2026 at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): Ephesians 1:15-23

Introduction: What's it got to do with us?

For many Christians, I think the Ascension of Christ is a piece of doctrine which they are aware of, but don't give much thought to. It's in the Creeds, so we're used to mentioning it. The Apostles' Creed says:

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.¹

The Nicene Creed has:

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end. ²

Some people may get stuck on the physical description of the Ascension contained in chapter 1 of the Acts of the Apostles. It was easy enough for people in the first century to believe that Jesus physically rose into the sky, as the word for sky and heaven were the same – *ouranos* in Greek or *ha shamayim* in

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe/apostles-creed>

² <https://www.churchofengland.org/faith-life/what-we-believe/nicene-creed>

Hebrew. The sky, or the heavens, represented a realm outside of the earth, an infinite and mysterious space, and as God was greater than everything terrestrial, that was where God lived. Now, with our scientific understanding of the universe, this is more difficult.

Yuri Gagarin's close friend and cosmonaut colleague Alexei Leonov told this humorous anecdote about a conversation between Gagarin, the first cosmonaut to go into space, and the then premier of the Soviet Union, [Nikita Khrushchev](#). "So tell me, Yuri," asked Khrushchev, "did you see God up there?" After a moment's pause, Gagarin answered, "Yes sir, I did." Khrushchev frowned. "Don't tell anyone," he said. A few minutes later the head of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) took Gagarin aside. "So tell me, my child," he asked Gagarin, "did you see God up there?" Gagarin hesitated and replied "No sir, I did not." To which the Patriarch replied, "Don't tell anyone."³

To us today, heaven makes much more sense as a spiritual dimension to the universe, which co-exists with the physical universe but is not part of it. It seems to me perfectly possible that Jesus was hidden from his disciples by a low cloud and disappeared just as he had in the encounter with the two disciples in Emmaus. Given Jesus' warning that he was leaving the disciples to return to his Father, the obvious explanation for them was that he'd gone upwards into the sky. And Luke's description simply expresses the mystery of the Ascension in poetic imagery.

³ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Yuri_Gagarin, accessed 17/05/2026

Why is the Ascension important for us?

The significance of the Ascension is that the risen Jesus has been exalted to the right-hand of God, and, as he says in his parting words in the gospel of Matthew, has been endued with all authority⁴. As Paul writes in our reading from Ephesians,

[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.⁵

In ancient times the seat at the king's right hand was the highest place of honour. Jesus has been rewarded for the sacrifice he made for us all on the Cross. We now have a human being in the presence of God, our High Priest who makes intercession for us. Moreover, his return to heaven prepares the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul makes a direct link between the Ascension of Christ and the experience of all Christians. In the first 14 verses of the chapter he rehearses the amazing work of God in choosing us to be adopted as his children, redeeming us from sin by the blood of Jesus, promising us an eternal home in heaven, and revealing to us "the mystery of his will". And in verse 13 he specifically refers

⁴ Matthew 28:18

⁵ Ephesians 1:20-23 NRSV

to how his readers, whom he seems not to have met personally, have come to know this salvation through their faith in Christ and by receiving the Holy Spirit. Their faith and love have become known to Paul, and so he assures them of his prayers.

God and us

What Paul wishes for the readers of his letter should also be our desire, something we pray for. You can be sure that they were no different from us – just ordinary Christians trying to live out their faith, and needing the encouragement of Paul’s message. And so Paul’s prayer for them is something we can make our own too:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.⁶

In my sermon last Sunday morning I spoke about knowing God personally, based on Paul’s speech in Athens and Jesus’ words at the Last Supper. This is exactly what Paul is writing about in our text from Ephesians. It’s about the difference between saying “I *think* the Christian faith is true” and saying “deep down I know God loves me and has a great future for me”.

⁶ Ephesians 1:17-19 NRSV

How does this become a reality? Obviously, we have to want this for ourselves – want to grow in a relationship with God. But it's not just down to us to search for God. Paul says that what makes the difference is the infinite power of God, the power with which he raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his right hand in heaven. As Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans,

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.⁷

It is through the Holy Spirit that we can know God for ourselves, and can grow in faith and in the experience of his presence. In celebrating Pentecost next Sunday, we will be reminded of the power of God, shown on that special day in wind and flame. But we don't have to wait until next Sunday. If we have believed in Christ and submitted our lives to him as our Lord and Saviour, we already have the Holy Spirit. We just need to be filled and re-filled day by day.

Practical steps

There are a few simple disciplines that can help us become closer to God. One is to pray every day, ideally at least once in the morning. But we can also do something called “practising the presence of God⁸”. It's a bit like mindfulness, but with God involved!

⁷ Romans 8:11 NRSV

⁸ As espoused by the 17th century monk, Brother Lawrence, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Practice_of_the_Presence_of_God and <https://www.eden.co.uk/christian-books/christian-living/the-practice-of-the-presence-of-god-9781640322004/>

Another is to read and study the Bible, both on our own and with other Christians.

Corporate worship, especially receiving Holy Communion, is another source of God's blessing, And finally, putting our faith into practice by acts of service to others and to the church is another powerful way to grow in faith.

And that, in summary, is the connection between the Ascension of Christ and us.