

Acts 1:1-11 The Ascension of Our Lord

The Word of the Lord from Acts 1: "He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

For the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus taught about the kingdom of God. This was nothing new. When John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, he declared, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As soon as Jesus began to preach publicly, He proclaimed the same thing; and when He sent out the twelve to preach in Matthew 10:7, they were to echo the message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Many of the parables He told began, "The kingdom of heaven is like...:" "The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; like a grain of mustard seed; like a treasure hidden in the field." The kingdom of God was even proclaimed at Jesus' suffering and death: the soldiers mocked Him as king, even put a scepter in His hand and a crown of thorns on His head. And when He was crucified, the accusation above His head declared that He was "guilty" of being the King of the Jews.

It was, and is, a kingdom like no other. In fact, it turned a lot of people off: they wanted a Messiah-King who would be a king like all the others, only stronger. They wanted a Caesar or a Xerxes or an Alexander the Great, just far more powerful and on their side. But the kingdom of God is not a kingdom of this world. It is not a kingdom of land and armies. It does not grow by conquest and violence. To understand the simple truth of the kingdom of God, go back to the sermon of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Not "coming soon," but "at hand." Why was the kingdom of heaven at hand when John preached this at the Jordan? Because Jesus was there. Where this King is, there is His kingdom.

Where Jesus is, that is where the kingdom of God is found.

So Jesus taught about the kingdom of God during the forty days between His death and resurrection. The apostles were no doubt an attentive audience. They'd been where Jesus was for three years of His public ministry. They'd seen their King nailed to a cross and they'd assumed the worst. But now they saw their risen King, nail-prints and all—the King who had conquered even the kingdoms of death, devil and hell.

Jesus was with them. And where Jesus is, that is where the kingdom of God is found. This would not go this way for long: Jesus told them He was departing from their sight again. You hear it in the words, "And while staying with them He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, He said, 'you heard from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (Acts 1:4-5).

After these words, and very close to the Ascension, the disciples asked about the kingdom: "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Even then, it seems, they didn't quite "get" the kingdom yet—they were still looking for another kingdom of the world, only

better. So Jesus responded, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Then He ascended into heaven. He was lifted up, body and all—received by a cloud out of their sight. Then angels declared to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven."

The King was gone; and where Jesus is, that is where you find His kingdom. Did this mean that the kingdom was gone too? What did this mean—for the apostles and for the rest of the believers?

Were they on their own, apart from Christ, until the King returned in glory?

Not at all. Remember, Jesus promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them—this would happen at Pentecost. What does the Holy Spirit do? He uses the Word of God to bring people to faith—and where the Word of God is, you will also find Jesus—the Word made flesh.

The Holy Spirit joins people to Jesus' death and resurrection in Holy Baptism—people are joined to Christ by water and the Word: He is not far away, but promises He is with you to the end of the age. And the Holy Spirit works to deliver Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of sins in the Holy Communion. In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit is to bring Jesus to you. And where Jesus is, there the Kingdom of God is found. That's why Jesus sent the apostles to be His witnesses, to preach His Word.

The Holy Spirit would work through that Word to bring Jesus to them. That's how the kingdom of God spreads on earth. This is a treasure that we gladly proclaim; and among Christians, we are best prepared to do so. See, many Christians today believe that Jesus is only in heaven because He has a human body, and the laws of physics dictate that a human body may only be in one place at a time. But our Lord, the Creator of physics, is greater than the laws of physics.

So, for instance, when He says of bread and wine, "This is My body and this is My blood," we don't say, "that's physically impossible." We give thanks that Jesus is present with us, forgiving our sins and strengthening our faith. Jesus is here. And where Jesus is, there is His kingdom. That means that you are in His kingdom now. You don't see it yet, but you've got His Word on it. Other Christians believe that Jesus will come back in glory, before the Last Day, and set up a kingdom on earth that will last for a thousand years before He ends this world.

Like many in the first century, they expect the Messiah to set up an empire on earth. This is a bad reading of the book of Revelation, and it has the unfortunate effect of teaching that Jesus and His kingdom are future things, not present realities. But you know better: in His means of grace, Jesus is here.

And where Jesus is, there is His kingdom. So the Ascension of Jesus gives you two great comforts. On the one hand, Jesus is ascended into heaven. He even took His body with Him—a testimony to you that He will raise you from the dead—body and all—and deliver you to heaven, body and all. Ascended into heaven, Jesus sits at the Father’s right hand and rules all things for your good.

One of my favorite quotes from a sermon by Martin Luther is about the Ascension of Jesus: My Lord Jesus Christ is Lord over death, Satan, sin, righteousness, body, life, foes and friends. What shall I fear? For while my enemies stand before my very door and plan to slay me, my faith reasons thus: Christ is ascended into heaven and become Lord over all creatures, hence my enemies, too, must be subject to Him and thus it is not in their power to do me harm. I challenge them to raise a finger against me or to injure a hair of my head against the will of my Lord Jesus Christ.... If my Lord so wills that they, mine enemies slay me, blessed am I; I gladly depart.

Thus you will see that He is ascended into heaven, not to remain in indifference, but to exercise dominion; and all for our good, to afford us comfort and joy. (Church Postil, 1st Sermon for Ascension Day, ¶27. 3:192) So Jesus is ascended into heaven to rule over all things for your good. That’s a great comfort as you endure the temptations and afflictions of this world.

This is also a comfort: the same Lord Jesus Christ who is ascended into heaven is also as near to you as His means of grace. He is with you—as near as His Word, forgiving your sins and strengthening your faith. You don’t live as one who someday hopes that you’ll be part of the kingdom of God. You are part of the kingdom of God.

You don’t see it yet: you will when the Lord returns in glory and delivers us to heaven. But while you don’t see it yet, you are part of God’s kingdom even now. Why? Because the kingdom is where Jesus is, and Jesus is here in His means of grace. You are part of the kingdom of God even now, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen