

Ascension

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 12 May 2013, by David Gill. Readings for the Sunday following the Ascension were Acts 1:1-11 and St Luke 24:44-53.

If you were writing one of the four gospels, how would you end it?

Would you conclude your account of Jesus of Nazareth with the drama of his execution? No, not possible. Or after the first of his resurrection appearances, ignoring the others? Hardly. Yet his earthly life was over. How could you wrap it up in a manner that echoes faithfully what that life had been all about?

The question, how to conclude, must have bothered all four gospel writers. And for good reason. How does one stop telling a story that itself has not stopped?

Matthew's gospel, for example, ends with what at first seems to be a tidy conclusion. On a hillside in Galilee, the risen Lord gives the eleven remaining disciples his great commission: go, baptise, teach. But then he adds: "I am with you always, to the close of the age". What sort of ending is it, when the main character is still on the scene, promising to remain forever?

Mark's conclusion, probably added well after the rest of the story, refers briefly to Christ's rising, his commission and his ascending to heaven. It's a clunky ending, leading some to think the original conclusion has been lost.

The fourth gospel, John's, has the risen Lord telling Peter to be a good shepherd and "feed my sheep". Then there's a verse saying Jesus did many other things that aren't written down. Then it just stops.

For the writer of the third gospel, there was an additional complication. You see, Luke didn't just pen the gospel that's over his name. He also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. So he faced the threefold question: how to end the story of the earthly Jesus, how to begin the story of the post-resurrection church, and how to connect the two.

With the story of Christ's ascension, that's how. Luke took a conviction that was well established among the early believers and presented it in narrative form. We

heard it in both today's readings, more fully in Acts than in the gospel. The risen Lord assures his friends of a God-given power to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". Then he is lifted up into a cloud – in biblical thinking, a sign of God's presence. He passes from their sight into heaven – as they thought of it, God's dwelling place.

The ascension is like the second of two bookends, bracketing an extraordinary life. The Jesus saga had begun with a virgin birth, a star and other miracle stories signaling a divine initiative. Now it has ended the same way. Forty days after Easter, it is the culmination of the resurrection gospel. The Son returns to share in the glory of the Father. The man of the cross takes his place on the throne of heaven. What he was, what he taught, the self-emptying love he embodied, is stamped with an authority that is divine, universal and enduring.

To us, of course, this all sounds strange. We don't think miracles, mysterious clouds, a three-story universe. Our minds work differently. What then does the Ascension signify for us? Just this. Using the language of drama, it highlights the conviction expressed in the church's earliest, simplest, most basic credal statement: namely, Christ is Lord!

Focus on that. Ponder its staggering implications. Jesus Christ -- crucified, risen and ascended -- is the living Lord of all.

Oh yes, we know only too well the signs that point the other way. Pain, suffering and death are real. Hearts and lives do break. Evil does still flaunt its monstrous power. But that, we also know, is not the end of the story.

This year, the Western (Catholic and Protestant) churches marked Easter five weeks before our brothers and sisters in the Eastern (Orthodox) churches – a calendar difference ecumenical engineers are still trying to fix. Most Orthodox celebrated their Easter last Sunday. You may have seen clips, on SBS news, of Orthodox Christians filing into a church, somewhere in Syria. In the foreground, security guards were checking people for weapons and explosives. In the background, the sound of shellfire.

Alas, SBS did not show us what was going on inside that church. It would have made a sharp contrast: hope-filled faces shining in the light of many candles, joyful voices singing the ancient Easter proclamation:

*Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor,
Radiant in the brightness of your King!
Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!
Darkness vanishes forever!*

He is our living lord. And he has conquered.

Christ's triumph not only puts evil in its place. It also reveals all other claims to authority for what they are. It relativises and dethrones them.

At the height of South Africa's struggle against apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was embroiled in one of many battles with the country's minister of law and order. Exasperated by the official's intransigence, Desmond boiled over. "Mr Minister," he said, "we must remind you that you are not God. You are just a man. And one day your name shall merely be a faint scribble on the pages of history, while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, shall live forever".

He is our living Lord. Now, not lost in the mists of time. A reality -- here, now and forever.

The Ascension gospel liberates followers of Christ from captivity to all our lesser loyalties. It is wonderfully counter-cultural. Oh yes we'll hope to love our country. We'll try to respect it's leaders. We may salute our flags. We may even, for some strange reason, hang those flags in our churches. But we will never forget that above the flags, beyond all such symbols of earthly authority, stands the cross. Christ lives – and reigns!

The ecumenical movement has produced many conferences. But none has had greater influence on its participants than the world conference of Christian youth that took place in July-August 1939. Mark well the date. Among those 1500 young people gathered in Amsterdam, many of whose countries would soon be at war, was someone whose memory we cherish at St Stephen's – Adriana Degenfeld-

Schonberg, as a young Dutch steward, helped run the show. Even then, she was busy making good things happen! So with the lights going out once again all over Europe, with war in north-east Asia already raging for years, what was the theme of that gathering? It was “Christus Victor” – Christ the Victor.

A month after the conference ended, the Second World War in Europe began. Many of those young men and women were in armies, in prisoner-of-war camps, in resistance movements. One, Willem Visser t’Hooft, would become the founding general secretary of the World Council of Churches. Another, Madelaine Barot, from France, would risk her life getting Jews to safety across the Swiss border -- I guess we’d now call her a people-smuggler. Yet another, DT Niles from Sri Lanka, would bring to birth the Christian Conference of Asia.

Christ the Victor. The theme continued reverberating for those young people, wherever they were and whatever the circumstances in which they found themselves. As their conference message had said: “The nations and peoples of the world are drifting apart. The Churches are coming together.... In war, conflict and persecution we must strengthen one another and preserve our Christian unity unbroken”.

He is our living Lord. Even for the church. Especially for the church.

On 27 May 1965, in a small Congregational church in Melbourne, I was ordained. It was, fortuitously, Ascension Day. I shall always be grateful for that coincidence of dates. The sovereignty of Christ is an important message for a new minister to have drummed into his or her head and heart. Through these 48 years, dealing with the church in many places and forms, I’ve often had cause to recall the Ascension theme of that ordination.

Yes, we all know the church’s fragility, for it is our fragility. We know its errors, its compromises, its divisions. They are our errors, compromises, divisions. We know its sin. It is our sin. But we also know the church does not rest, thank God, on our poor weak shoulders. It is not dependent on clergy or church councils, on theologians or bureaucrats, on hierarchies great or small. It is carried on shoulders much stronger than mine or yours. It is guided by one far more

trustworthy, sustained by a strength far greater. Its future rests ultimately with Christ, not us. He is the church's living Lord, never forget it.

Today begins Australia's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (the city's churches, please note, will gather on Thursday evening for a service of prayer at St James' Anglican Church, King Street. If you can, be there: 18.30, Thursday). This week we're remembering, with gratitude, how far the churches have come. We'll be committing ourselves afresh to the journey ahead. And, with the message of Ascension still ringing in our ears, we'll be recalling what propelled us into seeking the unity Christ wills for his people.

Do you remember I once told you about a hymn that became the great marching song for the ecumenical movement? It wasn't a song lamenting the sad divisions of Christ's people, though that would have been appropriate. It wasn't a song expressing resolve to work harder for unity, though that would have been appropriate too.

No, it was an Easter hymn, written by a Swiss pastor in 1923. You know it: "Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won".

That's the conviction that put fire into the feet of our ecumenical pioneers. Not a negative deploring the divided status quo, though it deserved deploring. Not even a positive aspiration to fix things, though things certainly needed fixing. What drove them on, through success and failure, in good times and in bad, when the task looked easy and when it seemed absolutely impossible, was their faith in God's life-giving, history-bending victory in Christ.

The conviction drove them. And it continues to drive us.

Christ is our living Lord. Of the world. Of the church. Of you and of me.

Thanks be to God!

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