

The Ascension

Christ in us for the world

Summary: Let's not be conformed to the patterns of this fallen and sinful world, but show the world a better way to live. Let us help our neighbours know our creator God loves them and that the commands of Jesus lead to a free, full, and forever life. Let us demonstrate how good it is to be a friend of Jesus by being such friends together, in unity, a learning community, growing in the knowledge of God to maturity, toward a lifestyle of integrity.

Scripture: John 17:20–26¹

Date: Sunday, 29 May 2022 (Narellan CCC)

Introduction

[title]

Signs of a Learning Community Culture

In my usual playful and provocative style, in last week's sermon I said something I knew would raise some eyebrows and possibly even some hackles. I did so, knowing it was provocative, yet hoping people would talk to me about it afterward.

To my great delight, almost half a dozen people did talk to me during our morning tea fellowship. Funnily, they all approached me in more or less the same way: "So, I noticed you referred to the Holy Spirit as 'she'. What's that all about?" This was said with respect and genuine curiosity, so I was able to share with them an interesting truth about the Bible they may not have encountered before.

I was greatly relieved by their question and those conversations because it means, for some of us, we are becoming a learning community. And it warms my heart to see us growing this value as a healthy and safe community.

If anyone else wants to hear my answer to that question, I encourage you to listen to the new "Deeper Dive" podcast, which you can either watch or listen to on our website. You will soon be able to access those recordings through your favourite podcasting software.

Explanation

We've come now to the final Sunday of the season of Easter. This season starts, obviously, with the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and then ends with his ascension "into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of the Father" (lines 10–11, *The Apostles' Creed*).

[*The Ascension by James Tissot*]

We get hints at the ascension of Jesus in several Old Testament passages. The most notable is Daniel 7:13–14, which tells of a "son of man" who rises up to the throne room of the Almighty and receives there a kingdom that never ends.

With his ascension, Christ assumes the offices of King, High Priest, and Prophet at "the right hand" of God the Father (Php 2:9–11). From there he was "made ... both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36) and began pouring out the Holy Spirit on his church (Acts 2:33).

In Psalm 110, which is frequently quoted in the New Testament, the Father invites the Son to, “sit at my right hand”. At the ascension, Jesus did just that, as he promised he would: “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Lk 22:69).²

The ascension then is an important event for it fully reveals Jesus’ person and purpose, even at it marks the completion of his earthly ministry.

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The time between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension was 40 days. During those 40 days he ministered directly to his disciples and prepared them to take on his mission to extend the kingdom of God throughout the earth. That mission would begin on the Day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week.

As we have already noted, those 40 days fully revealed Jesus’ heart for his friends, his grace and compassion for those who will place their faith in him and follow a Christian lifestyle. Nowhere is Jesus’ heart more plainly on display than in the prayer contained in our scripture focus today.

John 17:20-26

[bible]

I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word.
(John 17:20)

Jesus here prayed for the community of those who would place their faith in him through the mission and ministry of his disciples. If the disciples take up his mission, they will then spread the good news about Jesus. Through them, others will pledge their allegiance to the kingdom of God and follow Jesus’ commands. They would then enjoy the free, full, and forever life Jesus promised to his friends, and do so in community with each other.

[bible]

May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.
(John 17:21)

Here the Eternal Purpose of God is described, that the communion enjoyed by the Trinity would overflow and be enjoyed by others in community. Their unity is with each other as much as with the triune God. Their unity would be their witness encouraging others to place their faith in Jesus and follow his commands.

[bible]

I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.
(John 17:23)

The unity of the friends of Jesus would not be up to them to fabricate on their own. As Jesus promised many times (cf. Mt 28: 20), he would be with them always and until the end. That is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to convict, to teach and remind us of, as well as to encourage and equip us to follow the commands of Jesus. It is the love Jesus’ disciples show one another in community that will be the demonstration of our creator God’s love for all of his creation.

[bible]

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world's foundation. (John 17:24)

With this verse, Jesus became more urgent and intense in his prayer, shifting his language from asking the Father to declaring, "I want".

When Jesus prayed this prayer, he was with the disciples in the Upper Room, for his last supper, on the night he was betrayed. So what does he here mean by, "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am"?

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Commentators want to project Jesus' prayer into the future, but I believe we should take Jesus at his word. He enjoyed a full communion with God the Father right there and then. His prayer is that they themselves and together would enjoy that same communion, right there and then. That communion and community is what is called elsewhere "the kingdom of God".

We know from *The Book of Revelation* and other biblical passages that our creator God's Purpose and Will is to come and dwell amongst his people, so I can't believe Jesus is here praying they would leave their physical location to join him in another location. Jesus wants them to enjoy the same state of peace and spiritual maturity he has. In that "place" they will then see and appreciate the glory of his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. They completely understand who Jesus is and that what is written about him is true.

[bible]

Righteous Father, the world has not known you. However, I have known you, and they have known that you sent me. I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them. (John 17:25-26)

The "world", being those who have not placed their faith in Jesus nor live a Christian lifestyle, do not know their creator God and therefore cannot see him because their eyes are not open. They cannot hear him because their ears are not open. Nor do they want them open.

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The disciples, at the Last Supper, are finally now beginning to understand Jesus was sent by God. They had glimpses of this over the previous three years they spent with him, but just didn't get it. Arguably, at the moment Jesus prayed this prayer they probably still didn't get it, but when they witnessed his self-sacrifice, his resurrection appearances to them on multiple occasions, his forgiveness and grace and compassion toward them, then his ascension, we can be certain they finally understood what was so great and glorious, good and gracious about him, that he was the promised Messiah, the Son of the Living God!

Jesus' disciples then knew and understood the extent of our creator God's love for his people and his creation. That love compelled them to love each other, and to then love this fallen and sinful world through sharing the good news about Jesus.

Jesus prayed this prayer on the night he was betrayed, and his prayer reveals the depths of his love and grace and compassion, of his heart and his hope for his friends. Following his resurrection and prior to his ascension, we get a new appreciation for this prayer of Jesus, for it would still be on his lips as he "ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of the Father".

Application

Over the season of Easter, a lot of our scripture focus passages have reiterated Jesus' command that his friends "love one another".

In a couple of weeks I will begin a sermon series which will explore exactly how we are to practically love one another. For now, let me highlight why it is so very important this community of the friends of Jesus love one another for the sake of our neighbours.

Power Over Persuasion

[torn up political advertising]

A Facebook friend posted the following:

It's sad that politics can be this ugly. For four mornings I've gotten up before dawn putting up [political] posters and for three evenings I've had to drive around Jannali and Sutherland to take them in so that they don't get stolen or destroyed. Only three evenings because [the final day,] in Central Jannali, they were all stolen in broad daylight! ...

I thought I'd lay out my personal collection of destroyed posters. I promise you that every piece is actual roadkill, picked up by me. People of Hughes, THIS is what the haters didn't want you to see...

This is the first time I have personally heard of such behaviour, of people destroying the advertising of political candidates they do not favour. As a kid, I used to destroy political lawn signs because they were easy targets for flying karate kicks! But that was non-partisan. I would destroy any signs because they were easy targets. To destroy a sign because it's for a different candidate than your own favoured candidate is a whole other level of despicable in a modern liberal democracy.

This type of destructive behaviour was seen in many more electorates than just Hughes encompassing the Sutherland Shire.

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There is no longer any doubt political disagreements in Australia have become polarised, us vs. them, your candidate is evil whereas mine is a saviour, I am justified in violence against you to make my political point!

The problem with destroying the signs of political candidates is it expresses power over rather than engaging in conversation for the sake of persuasion.

The fact of the matter is there are politicians, journalists, institutions, corporations and advocacy groups who all profit from stoking your outrage, your sense of scarcity and threats to your freedom. The more angry, fearful, and confused you are, the more you will buy their products and engage in their agenda.

This is why there is a war on just about everything! A war on drugs, on poverty, on terror, on cancer, on Christmas ... we use the language of war to communicate how serious we believe an issue is. Now we even have a culture war, the sense our culture has been taken over by bad forces and we need to get it back.

When you are in a war you abandon persuasion for power. Instead of engaging your opponent in a respectful conversation where both parties may actually learn from each other, war seeks to mobilise others who already agree with you with the intent to overwhelm your enemy. If you can be convinced to be outraged about an issue, made to feel as if some resource is scarce, or that your freedom to do whatever you want whenever you want is being limited, then you will go to “war” and seek power over others to bend them to your will rather than seek to persuade them through a healthy conversation.

What does this have to do with the price of tea in China? Absolutely nothing! But it does describe for us how desperately our fallen and sinful world needs to be shown a relevant example of a better way to live.

[bible]

Righteous Father, the world has not known you. However, I have known you, and they have known that you sent me. I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them. *(John 17:25–26)*

This is what Jesus intended when he said he would be known by the community of his friends and be in them so the world would come to know him through our love for one another! (cf., Jn 13:35)

What does that look like?

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Let's say someone in our community does not think the way you do on an issue. Do you mobilise likewise concerned individuals to ostracise that person until she leaves our church? That is the pattern of this world after all—it's called 'cancel culture'!

Or do you sit down with her over morning tea to talk through the conflict in your viewpoints so that you may come to a mutual understanding? “By this everyone will know you are my disciples...”

What if someone eats the last bread roll during a community meal we are enjoying together. Do you climb up on a table and launch at him with a flying elbow drop? That is the pattern of this world! (alright, maybe that's too far-fetched an example)

What if it seems to you your family is being overlooked during that community meal? The pattern of this world would be to get in line early and make sure you got yours first, and maybe even a little extra, just in case.

A better way to handle the issue would be to draw the oversight to the attention of those organising the meal. Then our Ministry Team, who have been chosen by our members to look after how we run such events, to make sure no one is overlooked whether by negligence or any other reason.

This is precisely what happened in the first church at Jerusalem (Ac 6:1ff). The apostles had the church appoint deacons to make their was no racist discrimination in the distribution of food.

Following the apostles leadership, we too are committed to being a healthy, functioning, and safe community, and we have people who are planning to prevent and praying over such concerns.

Finally, let's say a young person in our community decides to start wearing clothes more appropriate for the opposite sex. A teenaged boy begins dressing like a girl or a girl like a boy.

The pattern of this world would be to affirm their new dress sense and even suggest the teen is more than likely the opposite sex to what their biology seems to indicate. Legislation in various states and countries is now forcing parents to affirm those choices or risk having their children taken from their care. Two examples will suffice: "A [Texan] father, who had his son removed from his care for opposing transition treatments, has announced he will get involved in politics to make a change for all parents and to outlaw all sex-change surgeries for children" and "Norway has a 'gender identity' law which means anyone who adheres to biological reality as fact can be charged for committing a 'hate crime'".³

The pattern of this fallen and sinful world would have us think it is our right and freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want to, while at the same time manipulates young people into thinking such deviant thoughts are 'normal' and 'natural'.

Sensible adults and scientists know that the brain does not fully develop, and is not capable of mature judgement, until the early 20s.⁴ Adolescence, then, is a time for "increased novelty seeking; increased risk taking; and, a social affiliation shift toward peer-based interactions". Adolescence is a time to experiment as one pursues identity and meaning. "Where do I fit in this world and what is my purpose?"

The pattern of this world is to allow teens to make life altering choices, like gender transition surgery, exactly when they are incapable of and ill-prepared for such choices.

So what do we, as a community of faith, do when one of our own young people shows such signs of experimentation?

I can share a similar and real example from my own life. When I was a young adult, I grew out a portion of my fringe and dyed it red. It looked quite cool at the time, but I wouldn't think the same today. At that time, I was a member of a Salvation Army church and in the Senior Band. Uniform wearing was very serious.

One day, when I entered the Band Room, before our practice, all the band members had sprayed red colour in their own hair to mimic my own hairstyle. I could have been offended, thinking they were making *fun of me*, when in fact they were having *fun with me*.

Fast forward a couple of years, when I moved to Australia to take up a role as a Youth Pastor with a Salvation Army church. I bought a pair of Doc Martin boots, the kind with the yellow stitching and laces. When I wore them with my uniform, I was told, in no uncertain terms, to get rid of the yellow.

One community was willing to accept me and my experimentation; another was not. I don't need to tell which group I remember fondly and contributed most to my faith development...

In contrast to the pattern of this world, we include and accept anyone and everyone, but we do not affirm those behaviours which are against God's design and against nature. Such limits are for the benefit of our young people and our old people. None of us should be free to do whatever we want when we want to because we are idiots and don't know what is best for ourselves as much as we think we do. We need limits and laws, and we need a community of friends and family to help navigate our way within those limits.

By resisting the outrage, the sense of scarcity and threats to our freedom this world would manipulate us into, our community of faith can provide a living, breathing example of a better way to live that arises out of our knowledge and conviction Jesus is who he said he is and that what is written about him is true!

Jesus is the ascended Lord of life who loves us and wants the best for us. When we are united in loving one another as he loves us, we are the kingdom of God in this present darkness.

[title]

Conclusion

Let's not be conformed to the patterns of this fallen and sinful world, but show the world a better way to live. Let us help our neighbours know our creator God loves them and that the commands of Jesus lead to a free, full, and forever life. Let us demonstrate how good it is to be a friend of Jesus by being such friends together, in unity, a learning community, growing in the knowledge of God to maturity, toward a lifestyle of integrity.

Let us pray...

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Mark Olivero, "Jesus' Ascension," in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- 3 "Texas Father Vows to Change the Law", *Binary Australia*, 8-Mar-2022, <https://bit.ly/3z3RlVj>, and "Truth Speech Prosecuted as Hate Speech in Norway", 27-May-2022, <https://bit.ly/3z2h14M> (both accessed 28-May-2022).
- 4 "Longitudinal neuroimaging studies demonstrate that the adolescent brain continues to mature well into the 20s. This has prompted intense interest in linking neuromaturation to maturity of judgment." —Johnson, Blum, and Giedd, "Adolescent Maturity and the Brain: The Promise and Pitfalls of Neuroscience Research in Adolescent Health Policy", *National Library of Medicine*, <https://bit.ly/3lTHgCC> (accessed 28-May).