

# Ascension

[ACTS 16.16-34](#)

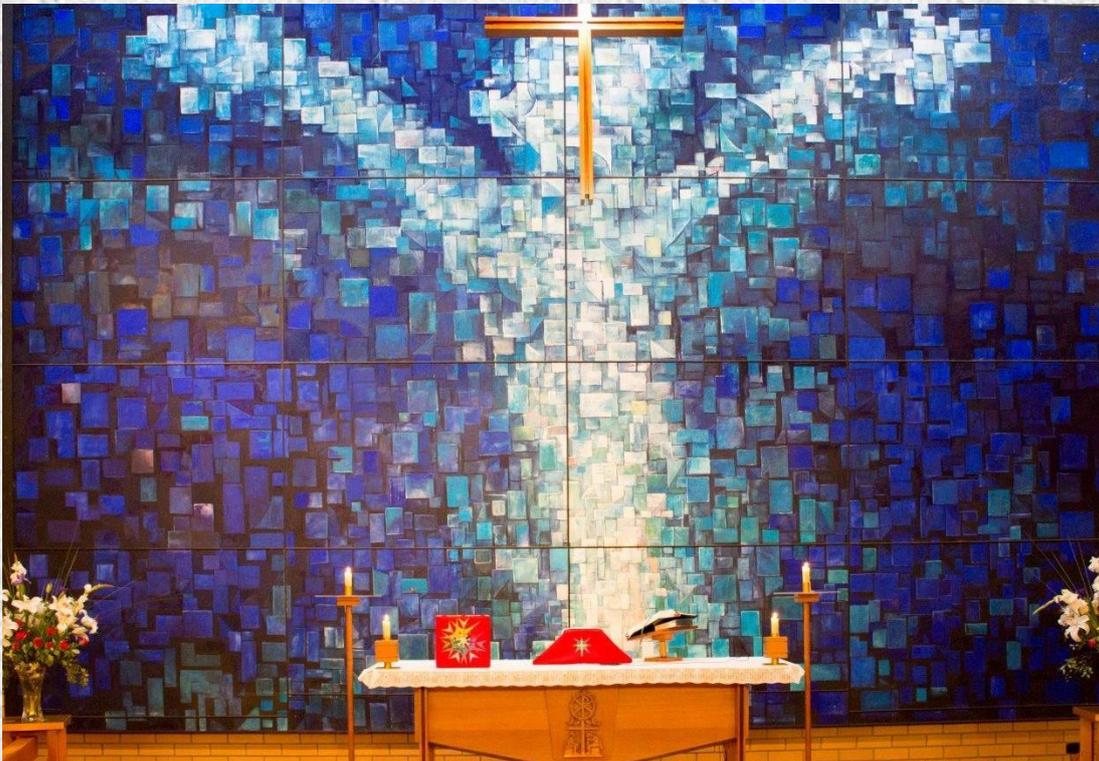
[Revelation 22.12-22](#)

[John 17.20-26](#)

Patience! I wonder how patient you would describe yourself as. You probably know others who are like me at this very time; they have recovered from Covid in that they now test negative, but their recovery is not yet complete and maybe the fatigue or cough persists. This happens in so many medical situations where we have to be patient and wait for the medication to take effect or simply for our bodies to heal.

Jesus' Ascension and its different meanings call us to be patient; we have to recognise that just like our physical selves take time to heal and we have to be patient while we do what we can to enable healing, so we are called to be patient as we wait on the Kingdom of God to come in all its fullness. We have to recognise our human limitations while following Jesus and working for the Kingdom of God and always expect to be equipped for the work we have to do.

Ascension draws together two stands of reality: Jesus has ascended and yet his Presence is with us day by day. Let's take these separately. Firstly, Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father - he is transcendent - above and beyond our concerns; and yet the powerful one we can approach in confidence. I can see how our Arthur Boyd mural captures this so well. The shimmering nature of Jesus attests to his 'otherness'. God in Christ is transcendent, and that Christ is high over all, truly and justly reigning over all of creation even when it doesn't always seem like it.



Our passage from Ephesians 1 also talks of two aspects of Jesus' work. There is his transcendence; Jesus has ascended into a position of power, as the old chorus says, 'His name is higher than any other': <sup>20</sup> *God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God's right side in the heavens,* <sup>21</sup> *far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future.*

I find this useful to remind myself when I am overwhelmed by the difficulty of affecting change. It is Jesus we serve and if we have done what Jesus asks of us, we must realise that we might not see the changes we know will eventually be part of God's reign. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they may know the power of Christ who is over all and fills all. May we also know this power in our lives, motivating and enabling us to become more and more like Jesus!

Secondly, Jesus is here, now, and we are called to be his body. He is not purely heavenly but *immanent* or here with us now. His leaving or ascending, means that there is space for the work of the Holy Spirit in each of us. Jesus' work shifts from being in a human body and so limited to a specific place and time, to a universal Presence, indwelling the multitudes of believers as they/we become 'the body of Christ' as we proclaim week by week.

In our Gospel reading for Ascension Day, Jesus gathers his disciples after the resurrection. He fills the room with his presence, eating with them and reminding them of all the things he taught them. All of their dedication and hard work of following Jesus was finally paying off.

Of course, Luke's Gospel does not end with the disciples' question "*Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?*" Here we see the need for patience! No, God's plan is that many more have the chance of coming into a living relationship with Jesus. And so, Luke records that <sup>7</sup> *Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority."* That is my answer to all the doomsayers- those who predict that the world will end on a particular date. This is not our business - it's up to the Father alone.

Jesus continues in v<sup>8</sup> *Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Luke's Gospel flows into the Acts of the Apostles where resurrection is lived out by the church in the space that has been created by the Ascension. The outstretched arms of Boyd's ascending Christ call to mind all those he wants us to embrace.

There's a story of a priest who was going through his normal routine of preparing for worship one Sunday morning. As was his custom, he opened the church and walked through the building, praying for those who would gather in that sacred space that morning. He then walked outside like he did every Sunday, to ensure that the peaceful grounds of the church were in order.

This morning, he noticed that a homeless man was sleeping in the courtyard. To make matters worse, the scruffy outsider had his shoes kicked off and his feet propped up on their statue of St. Francis.

The priest, not wanting to cause a scene with worshipers set to arrive any moment, quickly went to the homeless man and told him that while he was welcome to worship at the church that morning, the parishioners would be most upset to see him defiling their sacred statue with his dirty feet.

The man looked at the priest and said, "I'm happy to move my feet to a more suitable place if this is too holy. To keep me from repeating this mistake in the future, could you tell me what ground is not holy?"

As the story goes, the unknown man then revealed himself to be St. Francis, or in some telling it was Jesus, and then *poof* — he's gone.

In the Ascension, God in Christ proclaims all people as holy and beloved. This is why the British church had the ancient practice of beating the bounds. During the days ahead of Ascension Day they would wander the boundaries of the parish, blessing the homes and the fields as they went. Reading from the Psalms and the Gospel, the priests and town officials would beat the boundary posts of the parish to mark the space cared for by this portion of Christ's body. Ascension is about the body of Christ beating the false bounds of this world back with the claim of Christ taking space back from the grips of all that ails people and society today.

The Ascension is the feast where the church claims that God is still in the business of taking up space in the world through the body of Christ. From this point on, all ground is holy, all people matter, all places are ripe with the potential of resurrection.

Something to ponder as you reflect on Ascension is:

- how can we at St Mary's embody the good news of Christ?
- In what ways can we rejoice in God's ongoing work as Christ's kingdom takes up more and more space in creation?
- With what groups of people of goodwill - who may not even acknowledge God's presence - can we work for reconciliation, to support refugees, to care for the environment?
- How can we 'beat the false bounds' and provide a space for all?

Because that's what happens when the body of Christ moves in the world. People can wander into the void, and they hear that sacred voice call their name and echo out those precious words, "My child, come to the place I've prepared just for you."