Acts 1vv1-11: The risen and ascended King

If you were with us last week when we were looking at John 20, you will remember that shortly after Jesus has risen from the dead, he says these words in v17

"Jesus said to [Mary], "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Well since last week we have fast forwarded 40 days because today we are going to look at the time when Jesus does leave - when he ascends…

…. and as we will see, Jesus ascending is very important, because it teaches us that although Jesus has left the earth and gone to heaven… he still has much work to do on the earth.. thru his people…

READ Acts 1vv1-1

It's not uncommon for a TV series to begin with a "previously on the West Wing " bit… where it quickly reminds the viewer what happened in the last episode.

Well vv1-5 function a bit like that, reminding Theophilus the first reader, and all of us since then… where Luke's first book ended…

… Jesus died, proved that he rose from the dead, and then ascended into heaven

And so as we pick things up at verse 6 we get to listen in on the final conversation between Jesus and his apostles, before he ascends to heaven.

And we quickly learn that the apostles… now being ***convinced*** that Jesus ***is*** risen… begin to think that this means that the restoration of the kingdom must be soon. Their expectancy is seen in their question...

"So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

But this was the wrong question to ask…. on several levels

For not only were they thinking about the kingdom ***politically***, or ***nationally***, that Israel would once again be a great nation.

… They were also thinking in the ***immediate*** 'at this time'.

I want to underline the phrase, "at this time."

That is the issue that Jesus calls to their attention, not the issue of the nature of the Kingdom, but their preoccupation about when it will come. That is where they were wrong.

it is of course understandable… Jesus has just died, ***and*** risen from the dead just as he said he would… what else can there be left to do… surely it is time?!

… surely the work is done… isn't it??

But in vv7-11 Jesus is clear that they are not to worry about the ***when***, but rather they are in the meantime, to get on with the job in hand…

for there is still much to be done!

#1 - The command to witness to all nations vv7-8

The command is clear isn't it, there in v8?… they are to witness.

But what does '*witness*' mean, for an apostle?

Well an apostle, we read in v2 is someone 'chosen' by Christ,

And in v3 – someone who has seen many proofs that Jesus has risen, heard him speak of the kingdom

and a little later in vv21-22 – during the selection of the 12th disciple to replace Judas, again it is emphasised that an apostle is someone who...

"[has] accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.""

What are they to witness to?… The risen Lord Jesus.

That is why Jesus says they will be '**my** witnesses... v8'.

They are to give testimony to Jesus' story rather than their own.

Having seen and heard… they are now to tell.

But tell where? …

Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria... ends of the earth

… the kingdom will begin in Jerusalem, but it will spread from there to the northern and southern kingdoms and beyond, into Gentile country.

later in Acts chapter 1, Verse 15 tells us that there are about 120 believers meeting as the first church in Jerusalem. But that is not how things are to stay. They are not to remain an exclusive club, a Christian ghetto.

The message of the risen Christ, the message of the Kingdom of God is to go throughout the world…

I remember being told of one church, where as you left the church, above the exit, they had written the words 'you are now entering the mission field.'

And that's right isn't it…. v8 includes the world ***out there!***

But 'Jerusalem to the end of the earth' is not only to be considered ***geographically***... this description is as much ***theological***, as it is geographical

… this is a wonderful picture of God's kingdom having people from all nations –it will be a fulfilment of the promise of God to his servant in Isaiah 49:6...

YHWH says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

and we sit here today as evidence that this is still happening

So the good news of salvation for all those who believe in Jesus, will reach to the ends of the earth. How?

… Through the witness of the apostles... yes absolutely… but also through you and me.

For as you read thru Acts, you will notice that it is not just the apostles who witness to Jesus…

Acts chapter 8 is probably the best example...

Severe persecution of Christians has broken out, and in verse 4 we are told that '*those who were scattered went about preaching the word'*.

Now but for verse 1 we would think that referred to the apostles: but verse 1 says all the Christian believers were scattered '***except*** the apostles'!

Despite the fact that their leaders were not with them, the believers spread the word… continued to bear witness!

So we must remember we are not apostles (having witnessed the risen Lord Jesus 1st-hand) – but we do have 'their' testimony 'to' Christ… in the 4 gospel accounts

the apostles were **eye** witnesses… you and I are **ear**-witnesses

and our evangelism therefore is to witness to Jesus Christ, thru His testimony found in the Bible.

It's a bit like like when I watch 'Match of the Day' on tv. (this is a football highlights programme on the BBC)

…Having seen the football highlights I can chat to people saying... 'did you see the match yesterday... what a game'.

That is not the same as someone who was in the crowd that day, or even on the pitch… but I can talk about the same match, having seen that which was recorded for me by the BBC.

If we are Christian believers here this morning… We also, are to witness to Jesus – we are to tell his testimony.

... and here's the most mind-blowing thought… to bear witness to Christ…

#2 - Continues the work of the King Jesus vv9-11

That's my second point. The command to witness, is a command to continue the work of King Jesus

Which brings us onto Jesus' ascension…

You see, having defeated death, and having spent 40 days giving convincing proofs that he really is risen (v3) – and having said all he needs to say, about the kingdom, – we read in v9 that Jesus is lifted up... but it is only once the apostles can be left in no doubt that Jesus is the risen King, that Jesus leaves them.

"... as they were looking on, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

At his ascension Jesus finally leaves the earth.

Jesus is no longer physically on the earth…

… but we must not think that his work is finished

The book of Acts records what **Jesus continues to do and teach** thru his body, the church

a) Continues the work...

And the big clue is that little word we find towards the beginning of chapter 1 there in verse 1 – 'began'.

So Jesus ascension is not a case of Jesus simply handing over the baton – that he started the work, and now we've got to carry it on. Luke says that his first book was about… *"all that Jesus **began** to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven… "*

Luke seems to be saying that in Acts he is going to continue where he left off, with all the things Jesus ***continues*** to do.

So in Acts, what we have, is a continuation of Luke's story of Jesus, in that what Jesus began, he will continue.

And so Luke is not so much writing the Acts of the ***Apostles***, as it is often called… but volume two of the Acts of ***Jesus***, who is now working thru his apostles and his church, in the power of the Holy Spirit

It is the *Lord Jesus Christ* who is the focus of the book of Acts, and it's Jesus who is with, and working through, his followers for the rest of it.

But allow me to just pause there to clarify something…

For in one sense, *Jesus' work **has** finished* – his work of redemption was accomplished on the cross.

… Man's debt for sin could be marked "paid in full."

… as he breathed his last in the cross – he said 'it is finished.'

And so we can safely say that Christ's work of redemption has indeed finished.

this is made very clear for us in the letter to the Hebrews…

Hebrews 10vv11-12 [READ]

"And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

Do you see the total contrast here between the priests in the temple, and Jesus Christ.

All these previous OT priests had to stay standing, because they had to ***keep*** offering sacrifices - bulls, goats, lambs, grain and so on - day after day. No time to sit down… always more work to do, more sacrifices to offer!

But when Jesus, *"this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down…"*

Jesus has sat down, having completed his work - no more sacrifice is needed, full stop!!

And so because Jesus ascended, and is seated, we can be sure that his work on earth is completed.

Jesus has done all that is needed for you and I to be forgiven - everything.

(Cf. Hebrews 1v3, 8v1 and 12v2 as well)

Now the implications of this are huge…

… For it means that no one else can do this work.

There is no other go-between - that is the whole message of the letter to the Hebrews, to Jewish Christians who were in danger of turning back to their old ways.

… No earthly priest, whether from any other religion or 'Christian', can gain access for us into God's presence.

It is only thru Jesus' finished work on the cross - not through singing particular songs or managing to be sufficiently quiet and still.

… Jesus is the only way in which our broken relationship with God is restored. Jesus has done it all!!

Which also means **we** cannot do ***any more*** to get ***any closer*** to God - because Jesus has done all that is needed.

Jesus has opened that way for us. Christians should have great confidence in what **Jesus** has **done**.

… Jesus' work of redemption is finished.. he has sat down!

But… Jesus did not say *"**I** am finished"* in the sense that his work on the earth was completed. Only his work of salvation was finished. The work of ***proclaiming*** that salvation is still going on.

As one author comments… "While the provision for man's salvation was the work of our Lord which was completed on the cross of Calvary, the proclamation and application of the benefits of this work have continued through the centuries, through the church, the body of Christ."

As we have just been thinking, the apostles in the first instance, but also us today are to be involved in the work of the kingdom by being witnesses.

We are called to continue this work – and it is not just any work – it is a royal work - it is the work of the King…

b) …*Continues the work* ***<u>of the King</u>***

Now it must have been pretty amazing to watch, judging by the stunned amazement in response to it. The apostles are just left staring at the sky!.

But rather than be concerned with ***how*** Jesus ascended, we should be concerned with the '***why***' he ascended?

The answer: To rule at father's right hand – Jesus is the king, ruling over the world.

Four times the disciples are told where he is (heaven = sky). This is the place of supreme authority.

Listen to how the apostle Peter explains this in chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, just ten days later…

Acts 2:32-33

"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ***33*** *Being therefore* ***exalted at the right hand of God****, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing."*

Peter tells us it is because Jesus is now **exalted in heaven** that he was able to pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So yes… Jesus is now invisible to our physical eyes, but we must remember he is highly exalted by God.

… There is no one greater than him - and therefore no-one else is to have the allegiance which Jesus deserves, and demands from each one of us.

The apostle Paul writes, in Philippians 2:9-11, *"Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".*

That's why no human individual or organisation should ever command our allegiance in the same way that Jesus Christ does. No family member, no employer, no football team, no church denomination, no political party, no country.

In previous centuries this ultimate allegiance to Jesus has meant millions of Christians have lost their lives or possessions…

… from the persecution by Roman emperors, through oppressive regimes last century, to the current situation in many totalitarian states today

Jesus commands our allegiance, for he is the one ascended and seated at the right hand of God

… But Jesus will not always remain there!!

The disciples stand watching Jesus as he ascends into heaven. But then two angels appear next to them, and ask …

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"

… in other words, *'What are you waiting for? Jesus will come back, but in the meantime, don't just start at the sky… You've got your orders – now get on with them!'*

… Jesus will return in the same way as he has departed

Jesus will return… and his concern then will be to see how his command to witness to the world has been completed..

If a commanding officer gives orders to his soldiers about what they should do, he expects them to carry out those orders.

He does not expect them to dither about - nor does he expect them to draw up their own orders or agenda instead!

In the same way, Jesus has given his church his orders.

Although we are not witnesses in exactly the same way as these first disciples who actually saw and were taught directly be Jesus, we are to pass on their message.

We're to faithfully convey their eye witness accounts of what happened.

"... the task of evangelism is what is going to uniquely define and characterise the gospel age – the church age – the time when Jesus reigns in heaven, and his people on earth get on with the task in hand."

Well we are still in that age – King Jesus has ascended and continues to rule over every continent, class and culture. The royal work of evangelism continues until the King returns.

As Christians we are to tell others about Jesus Christ, because...

1. We are commanded to witness
2. It continues the work of the king

And finally, because we cannot do it on our own, we must remember…

#3 - The crucial role of the Holy Spirit

We have already considered how the gospel message is to spread geographically, but please look back with me to verse 8...

"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."

The ability to witness occurs only once they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit.

That is why back in verses 3 and 4 they are told to wait '*for what the Father had promised*' = the Holy Spirit.

… Without Him, they will be useless, ineffectual.

Only when the HS is given will they be ready to witness.

… only then will they have the courage to speak of their risen Lord

… only then will they share Jesus' love for the lost - and know how an unbelievers status before God, is way more important than our status before others (how God sees them, matters a lot more than how they see us)

The apostles will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to Jesus Christ, and in so doing, continue the work of the King.

I wonder if you ever watched the cartoon about Popeye.

Faced with a seemingly impossible task, recognising he could not do it on is own… Popeye would reach for a can of spinach – and this would provide the strength he needed to complete the task.

Well as Christians we have something greater than spinach...

As followers of Jesus Christ this side of Pentecost; the HS is given to us as believers straight away, we don't have to wait.

… And He equips and empowers us to testify about JC.

There is surely no greater encouragement as we seek to share Jesus with others… for we are not alone in this work!

we have the same powerful Spirit at work in us, whom the apostle Paul tells us, raised Jesus from the dead! (Cf. Romans 8v11, Eph 1vv19-20)

So to finish… as Christian believers we are commanded to witness to Jesus Christ throughout the whole world… to continue his work.

Jesus began the work; and HE continues through his church.

Isn't that exciting – we are commanded to be a part of Jesus' royal work, the work of the king of the universe.

And we do not do it on our own – in fact we can't.

But God gives us His Holy Spirit, and it is by His power that we witness.