

Session 1: The Ascended Jesus Transcript

It is good to welcome you to the first of five sessions of this year's Lent Course, Knowing Jesus. Today our theme is The Ascended Jesus.

In Burnley, we have a parish that serves a very diverse and multi-cultural area the town. Once every few months, in partnership with other denominations, the parish holds an act of worship on the streets. They want to take the church out of their church buildings to demonstrate that they are present and active. So a few weeks ago they chose a suitable spot in a residential street, sang a few songs and hymns, read from the scriptures and then a lay leader started preaching.

In one of the nearby houses there was a family who had recently arrived from Italy and who felt alone in a strange land. They spoke not a single word of English. But from through the window they heard the name Jesus. They understood nothing of what was being said except that name. Jesus. And the name was enough. The whole family came out of the house and they ran as fast as they could to join in with the worship. They came running at the name of Jesus.

There is power in the name of Jesus. In this course we will explore what it means to run towards to Jesus and embrace him fully as saviour, friend and king. It may be that you are fairly new to faith. If so this course is an invitation to discover what it means to live your life in the company of Jesus Christ. It could be that you have been going to church for years. For you, this course invites you to go deeper, to discover that the Good News is even better news than you imagined and to explore not just a corporate but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

We are going to travel this journey in the company of the Acts of the Apostles. Many of you will be following Acts during the course of Lent, either on the Fruitful App or in the Lent Devotional which is circulated around the Diocese of Blackburn. That will enable you to dig more deeply into Acts.

Across five sessions, what I am going to do is select five stories from Acts and look at them through two lenses. The first lens is knowing *about* Jesus. What do we learn from this passage about who Jesus is? This is what theologians call Christology. But the second lens is *knowing* Jesus. Having understood more about who he is, how will it change our lives to be in personal relationship with him? Knowing about Jesus. Knowing Jesus.

So let's begin at the beginning. In Acts Chapter 1 verse 9 we read: *'When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.'* When I was a boy, I remember every May being marched in a crocodile from school to Church because it was Ascension Day. It was a major event. The whole school attended

the service. We choristers rehearsed the music for weeks in advance. After the service, we even got to go home at lunchtime, much to my mum's annoyance because she had to arrange childcare. The Ascension was seen as so critical that school shut.

For some reason the Ascension is much less observed these days. You may barely even have heard of it. Yet in Acts, the Ascension is the critical event. Everything that happens next in this high-drama, high-tension book of the Bible is played out in the light of the verse I've just read. The Ascension explains everything. How can that be?

Let me explain with a story. When I first became the Bishop of Blackburn I had to go and meet the king. Now unsurprisingly this did not take place in my kitchen or in a motorway services. No, I had travel all the way to London to see him at his palace. That's the way it is with kings. By their very nature they live distant and apart, surrounded by their vast staff in the midst of comfort and splendour.

So imagine this. Imagine if the king left his palace behind and came to live with you. Imagine he moved in to your house, slept on your sofa bed, shaved in your mirror, ate your egg and chips and then helped with the washing up. Now imagine that, having stayed with you, he goes back to his palace and invites you to come along with him. Because he has moved in with you, you can move in with him. You can delight in the luxury and joy of palace living. You can even reign with him.

That may feel like a bonkers thing to imagine. But actually it's the Gospel. The king has left his palace behind to move in with you and that means that you can move in with him. And I'm not talking about King Charles any more. No, I mean The king, the King of Kings. King Jesus.

First, King Jesus has left his palace behind to move in with us. A really important word for Christians is Incarnation. It means that God has taken flesh. Jesus is not just a human being. He is not just a prophet or a teacher or a moral example. He is God. Perfect in his humanity. Perfect in his divinity. The second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of the Father, has had a birthday, been born, taken flesh. And because he is both God and man he is able to dwell with us. He shares our lives. He knows all about being human, the joys and fears, the full range of emotions. As Calvin writes, 'He put on our feelings along with our flesh.' He knows what it is like to be you. In other words the King has left his palace and moved in with us.

And because he is both God and man, he is the one whose death on the cross has power to save us. You see there is one thing that God by his nature cannot do which is to die. Because in Jesus God takes a body from the Virgin Mary, he now can die, dying on our behalf the death we deserve because of sin. And then as God he can overcome and destroy death so that its power is ended for ever and we are set free to live life in all its fullness.

So in the Incarnation, the king leaves the palace to move in with us. But then second, the king returns to the palace. That is what happens at the Ascension. Jesus returns to the Father because his saving work is done.

And that return to the palace means two things for us. First it means we have a certain hope. In the creed and in the book of Hebrews, Jesus is said to be sitting at the Father's right hand in heaven. Sitting down is what you do when your day's work is complete. We've all done it. You come back home exhausted and flop down on the sofa with a cup of tea and a tub of Pringles. Jesus sits because his saving work is done. Once he has returned to the Father, the work of salvation is complete. There is no jeopardy. Sin is destroyed. Death is ended. We are free to rejoice in our humanity and be the people God always intended us to be.

So in the Ascension we find a rich hope. As he sits at the Father's right hand Jesus is still human. The Incarnation doesn't end. So there is a human being in heaven, and where he is there we who believe in him will one day be. Jesus takes us back to the palace with him. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. What amazing joy that is! Jesus wants to be with us so much that he has come to share our life so that we can share his life for ever.

And as well as a rich hope, we find a compelling purpose. In John's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples that his Ascension is necessary so that the Spirit can come. And guess what, in Chapter 2, the Spirit does come. And the disciples can set off on their journeys, travelling across the known world, sharing the news that Jesus has died and has risen and that there is life in his name.

In baptism and confirmation, we receive the same spirit, the spirit of Pentecost. And so we find our purpose in this life which is to make that saving news known and live our lives as Jesus intends. Because of the Ascension, Jesus has a plan for us, one that brings purpose to our lives.

So that is what we learn *about* Jesus from the Ascension in Acts Chapter 1. In the Incarnation, the king leaves the place to dwell with us. In the Ascension the incarnate Jesus returns to heaven to complete his saving work and prepare a place for us.

That's all great news, but maybe it sounds a bit theoretical for your liking, a bit idealistic. So are you ready for the really amazing thing. This ascended Jesus who sits at the Father's right hand? You can know him. This triumphant and glorious Lord? You can be friends with him. This God who dwells in magnificent light, surrounded by flights of angels? He knows your name and loves you. And you can be in a relationship with him deeper than that which you have with your own child or spouse.

Imagine some mega A-list celebrity. Ariana Grande or Tom Cruise or King Charles or Cristiano Ronaldo. Imagine you had their private number on your mobile. Imagine you

could video call them whenever you liked. Imagine when you call, whatever they are doing, they stop and take your call and just chat for as long as you like without distraction or interruption.

That is the access you have to King Jesus. We Christians don't have some distant, aloof mysterious out there God who we have to seek after using intellect and human ingenuity. In Jesus God comes to find us, and having found us he leads us home. So we can know him for ourselves.

Maybe that's a hard thing to swallow because it can feel much easier to know about Jesus than to know him. The 'knowing about' can sit up here in our heads as a brain thing and we can theorise and discuss. The second, 'the knowing Jesus' hits the heart and makes us vulnerable because that's what love does. But the joy of the Christian life is that we have both. We can know about and we can know.

Having explored the Ascension, I hope we all now know a bit more *about* Jesus. So what do you do if you want to know Jesus more closely? Let me outline three simple steps.

First, ask for the gift of the Spirit. Pray that simple but powerful prayer, Come Holy Spirit. If you are baptised or confirmed, pray that the Spirit you received might be stirred up in you. It was the Ascension of Jesus that enabled the gift of the Spirit to be given, Then look what that Spirit did to the Disciples. Through the spirit, whatever happened they felt the closeness of Jesus. Through the Spirit gifts, were stirred up in them that enabled them to minister. Through the Spirit, these ordinary, simple followers were able to give an account of their faith. How could they do all this? Because it is through the Spirit of God that we know Jesus today.

You see there are many who would say that we are crazy, following a man who died two thousand years ago who we can't see or touch or eat with. They are forgetting the Spirit through whom Jesus is contemporary with us and alive for us. So if you want to know Jesus as opposed to just knowing about him, start with that prayer, Come Holy Spirit.'

Then second, deal with the sin that keeps him distant from you. Sin is the decision to choose a life focused on self rather than a life focused on Jesus. But by his death Jesus has dealt with sin and swept it away. To name it with a contrite Spirit is to overcome it. To claim the power of Jesus to forgive is to destroy it. And whilst there may always be sin in your life until you know the glory of heaven, there is always forgiveness and a fresh start.

And then third, consciously invite Jesus into your heart and into your life. Do that because that is what Jesus wants more than anything else. Why do you think he was born? Because he loves you and wants to be with you. Why do you think he gave away his life in sacrifice? To free you from sin and death so he could delight to be with you for ever. Why do you think he ascended? To prepare a home for you.

Like the Good Shepherd, Jesus has come searching for you. Like the father of the prodigal son he is waiting for you to come home to him. So let him deeply into your life. For his plan for you is a simple one – it is for joy. That is his purpose for your life. That is why you were made. For joy.

Of course there are lots of consequences of doing this, many of which we will explore later in this course. It means being part of a family of Christian believers who study the scriptures and celebrate the sacraments. It means living out the Gospel as you serve and share your faith.

But it begins in your heart. It is interesting that every renewal movement in the history of the church, Catholic or Protestant, begins when ordinary Christian men and women discover just how good the Good News of Jesus really is and let him more deeply into their lives. He is knocking now on the door of your heart. Open the door and let him in.