

## **Bundesratstatung 2022 – Predigt zu Himmelfahrt**

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Philippians 2:5-11

Good Morning. Thank you for the invitation to be here. Thank you also for your partnership with the European Baptist Federation. We give thanks for the faithfulness of German Baptists to European Christian family and especially at this moment for their support to Ukraine and Ukrainians who have left their homeland. I will say more about that tomorrow.

Right now what is clear is that events in Ukraine will be a defining moment in the future of all Europe. One of those moments that we will look back at and recognise the significance of it in shaping the political, economic and social dynamics of the continent.

Today I would like you to consider other defining moments. Firstly defining moments in your life. Moments that have defined who you are! Moments that have shaped your story. For me they include my Baptism as a believer aged 16, committing my future to serve Christ. Meeting and then marrying my wife Ruth. The birth of our 2 kids, the loss of my Father and so the list could go on.

If I were to ask you to consider the defining moments of Jesus life, I wonder what you would chose?

Why don't you share one or two with the person sitting next to you.

Matthew's Gospel appears to put Jesus defining moments on mountains. We start with the sermon on the Mount, Mount of Transfiguration, Mount of Olives and Calvary (crucifixion narrative) and you have the mountain in Galilee where the great commission is given. These mountain top experiences are maybe a clue as to Matthew's list of defining moments in Jesus life. Or at least guide us to what he thinks is important for his audience.

Paul chooses a different set of defining moments in Philippians 2. For him at that moment writing from Prison it seems to be a set of moments that defines the nature or character of Christ as a humble servant: They include his birth v7, his death v8, and the ascension v9. And apart from the clue that today is Ascension Day I wonder how many of us would have chosen the ascension as a defining moment in the story of Jesus. But for Luke it was so important that he had to state it twice. Firstly in the Gospel and then in the book of Acts.

Today I want to look at how the story of the ascension teaches us about the nature of the cosmos, the nature of salvation and the nature of the church.

## *Nature of the Cosmos*

In v10 Paul describes the cosmos as having 3 levels. In heaven and on earth and under the earth. He is picking up a Jewish understanding of the world and affirming it within the Christian belief system. But it is metaphoric. I don't think he is picturing a literal hell under the crust of the earth or a literal heaven above the clouds. He is painting a picture to allow us to use our limited imagination to grasp a world view that is beyond the earth and the sun and the moon which we see with our eyes and to grasp that there is something more. Something that is beyond the physical.

So v9 Paul says "God elevated Jesus to the place of highest honour". He took him from the lowest place, the cursed man on a cross, placed in a borrowed tomb and then elevated him from under the earth to above the earth. Luke gives us the picture of being caught up into the clouds. The clouds which from an Old Testament perspective speak of the presence of God experienced at a variety of times but maybe most significantly at the giving of the covenant at Sinai.

And now Jesus is seen as been raised to life then ascended in his new resurrected body.

So many people have tried to describe this connection between heaven and Earth. CS Lewis in the chronicles of Narnia attempts to capture the proximity of one to the other. The kids are able to walk between them showing the two worlds as connected. And yet separate, as time passes differently in the two kingdoms.

Paul and Luke are both pointing to a heaven which is present to this world, but beyond our ears, eyes and touch. Maybe even beyond our imagination. Many architects and artists have tried to help us grasp the vastness of the universe that is beyond what we see, hear and touch.

The sheer vastness of a cathedral is an indication from the architect that there is more to life. I attended the Christmas Carol service in St Paul's cathedral just before Covid struck. With three thousand five hundred people in attendance the sign on the door said that the cathedral was full. But of course it was far from full. Only the bottom 2 meters were full, only the seats were full. The vast Cathedral was still empty. The only thing that could fill the cathedral was the sound of singing. Singing and organ music reached out into all the high vaulted ceilings, circulated around the dome and filled the cathedral with sound for 13 seconds after the last note was sounded. It is a picture of something beyond us that is truly vast but connected.

And Paul in v10 and 11 presents a heaven related and connected to this world. He see's heaven and Jesus in particular as Lord over all the earth. God is not controlled by events on this earth. Jesus is Lord over all the earth, his presence in heaven assures us of this. When we consider the war in Ukraine. When we consider the flooding last year in Germany. When we think of the future climate crisis we are reminded that God is not controlled by these events on Earth. That he is Lord over all the earth. The ascension is central to a Christian world view. A view that Goes beyond the physical but does not reject the physical. A view where despite the chaos and turmoil of life Jesus still reigns.

And of course the ascension stories of Luke are filled with the reminder that this is not the end of God's involvement in the world. Ascension is not a moment of abandonment but Jesus is present in heaven and will return. There is always a pointer to a glorious future on earth as well as a foretaste and a foretelling of a new heaven and consequently a new earth that we will one day inhabit. And all these things should also impact our view of the world and leads us to a place of hope and expectation even as we face great danger and fear during our life on this earth.

The ascension is central to a Christian world view of the cosmos in its present state and future hope.

### *Nature of Salvation*

Particularly in the letter to the Philippians Paul demonstrates something of the nature of salvation in his references to the ascension.

I live with a physical reminder of salvation and rescue beside me every day. I live on a canal boat and moored next to me is this lifeboat. It is no longer a lifeboat, it has been converted into a home for my neighbour Christine. But even the fact that it has been converted reminds me of salvation. Paul in painting the picture of Jesus defining moments also points us to salvation and conversion. Jesus left heaven and was born we are reminded elsewhere of the nature of his mother as a virgin and the purity of Jesus birth and life. His death as the sinless son of God and yet dying as a criminal speaks of him dying in our place. His exaltation from the grave through resurrection to ascension reminds us of how sin has been defeated and death has been overcome. And now he reigns as Lord of all.

We cannot separate the ideas of Jesus as Saviour from Jesus as Lord. Paul has linked them in this passage and elsewhere.

It reminds me of my Baptismal promises and declarations when I said "yes Jesus is my Lord and my saviour". He is the one who leads me in a new direction. He has rescued me, set me free, I am undergoing a great conversion where I seek to decrease as he increases. Where I seek to surrender more and more of my life day by day because he is Lord.

And it is a battle every day. I like to think that I can fix things. People bring me a problem and I think what can I do to make it better. But the truth is we are not always able to fix things for ourselves never mind other people. So often I find myself being drawn into self-sufficiency. I take back Lordship of my own life. I take control and ignore the prompting of the Spirit. I acknowledge him as Lord of heaven and Earth but fail to allow him to be Lord of Alan Donaldson.

And at times when things seem helpless in our personal lives or in the world around us, we need to remember that Jesus is still Lord and Jesus will never abuse his authority. Luke uses the phrase "This same Jesus" and although he is pointing to the physical manifestation Paul points to the character. Jesus is humble, Jesus serves when he rules. He is lowly and meek yet all powerful. His character has not changed because his location is different. Jesus your saviour and Lord still comes to you in compassion, willing to serve as he leads you and guides you. Will we let him reign in us? Will we trust him to guide us? Will we take him at his word?

## *Nature of the Church*

In Acts chapter 1 Luke links the ascension and the great commission. He says “you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere” “After saying this he was taken up into a cloud...”

Why are you sky gazing the angels ask the disciples. Stop staring longingly into heaven. Don't become paralysed over something that is yet to come in all its fullness. This insight you have to another aspect of our world should inspire you to go into all the world. These days in Kassel are not designed so that you can look forward to coming back here next year. They are designed like the ascension to encourage you to go out into the world and fulfil the great commission. Because this is a moment of encouragement, empowerment and enablement.

Paul does the same in Philippians. As soon as he tells them about the ascension he now instructs them to go out and shine like bright lights in the darkness. The Bible writers know that life is not easy, they so often call it dark but we are to be lights, radiating with hope and joy and peace. This is the time to obey God and understand that God is working in you and through you.

Jesus ascension put him in a place where he can intercede for us. He hasn't become passive and unconnected from us or the mission of the church. The ascension means he intercedes on our behalf. Romans 8v34 declares that Christ is pleading for us. As we seek his kingdom he works on the barriers to that kingdom coming. If we seek first his righteousness, justice, hope, healing and good news he will work with us, in us and through us.

It is the ascension that leads Paul to say in Romans 8v38 “And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither our fears for today or our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whatever defining moments we are living through and experience. The defining moment of the ascension is the moment that truly releases the church in power into the mission of God. Heaven quite literally sent you into this world this day. With a true perspective of the cosmos in which we dwell, a deeper understanding of the nature of salvation and a calling to you the church to go with great confidence in the ascended Christ who intercedes for you as you serve him.

Amen