

Ps 47:2

Yarrow, April 11, 2010

Hy 1A

Hy 33:1,2,3,4,5,6

Ps 66:7,8

Ps 68:7; Hy 31:1,3,5

Hebrews 9:23-28; 10:19-25

Colossians 3:1-17

Lord's Day 18

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Reality, we say, is what we see, experience, taste. This is the life that demands our attention, absorbs us. It's where we have our fun, and our disappointments.

That is a pity. The world is so much bigger than what we can see or experience or taste. The Lord God, for example, told us that our Saviour Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and remains there for our benefit. When we confess Sunday by Sunday this ascension of our Saviour, we implicitly acknowledge that the world is bigger than we can see; in fact, we acknowledge that the most important place in God's world is not in Yarrow or even in Canada, but is in fact in heaven. If our view of reality were to be consistent with our confession of Christ's ascension, we'd find ourselves thinking and talking a lot more about heaven as we struggle with the bits and pieces that make up daily living. This is the perspective I preach to you this afternoon.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACE IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE IS IN HEAVEN.

1. In heaven is our Intercessor,
2. In heaven is our Home,
3. In heaven is our Focus.

1. In heaven is our Intercessor

Forty days after our Lord Jesus Christ arose from the dead, He led His disciples to a hill outside Jerusalem. He lifted up His hands over His disciples in that gesture of blessing, and while He was blessing them He arose from the earth. God sent His divine vehicle –in the form of a cloud– to carry Jesus into heaven. That's the testimony of Luke as we read it in Luke 24 and Acts 1.

One would expect the disciples to *regret* Jesus' departure into heaven. One would equally expect the early Christians to express dismay that Jesus left them. Would it not be better, we tend to think, that Jesus stay with His people, heal our sick, answer our questions, give us support we can see and encouragement we can hear?

But there's no expression of regret on the part of the disciples on account of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Instead, Luke reports that disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:52). And that is so intriguing! What's so exciting about Jesus' ascension that the disciples can be happy at His going?! What are we missing here?

First a word about where heaven is. We think of heaven as 'up there', and then learn at school about the solar system and the stars so many millions of light years away, and conclude that heaven is

somehow *beyond* all of that, a long, long way away. Jesus ascended, and that's to say that He's the first space traveller, and He's gone far beyond Pluto.... And No, we don't find that comforting at all.... And then we get the added problem that 'up there' when you're standing in Canada is actually the opposite direction than when you're standing somewhere on the bottom of the globe. Is heaven then a ring around the earth beyond the ozone layer? So: *everywhere* out there? It all gets so confusing....

Now, the Bible certainly makes clear that heaven is 'up', as in: Elijah as well as Jesus went *up* into heaven. But we need to realize that the Creator of the universe did not make only planets and soil and rocks and birds and grass; He also made *time* and *space*. We people, creatures as we are, can detect and experience only three dimensions: length, breadth, and height. But God the Creator is not limited by such creaturely restrictions. As He is above time, so He is above space, beyond space. And that's to say that a fourth dimension, one we can't begin to fathom, is for Him no problem. My point in saying this is that though heaven is, according to the Bible, definitely a *place*, we do not therefore have to be able to locate it on a map, not even somewhere way beyond Pluto. Christ's ascension is a mystery inasmuch as we are dealing here with the work of sovereign, almighty God – a work beyond our ability to understand. That we can't comprehend His work is fine and comforting; if we could comprehend it He would not be *God*, far beyond us. And that in turn would mean that He wouldn't be worth worshipping, nor would have reason to feel safe with Him....

Jesus, then, ascended into heaven, into that very real place where God dwells – though we can't begin to comprehend where this is in this world, or how Jesus could 'get' there. Yet the disciples saw Him go, and were positively *excited* at the knowledge of His ascension. We need to get a handle on why they were excited.

The reason, brothers and sisters, is because of what happens in heaven. To understand what happened there, I ask your attention for the world God created in the beginning. The Lord tells us in Genesis 1 that "in the beginning" He "created the heavens and the earth." The earth He gave to mankind as a dwelling place (and so loaded it with flora and fauna for mankind to rule), while heaven was His home. Meanwhile, the earth was dependent on God in heaven for its existence and continuance, and God Himself came regularly to Adam and Eve in Paradise to walk and talk with them. There was a relation of love between heaven and earth, God and man, and God's blessings upon man and the earth upon which He lived was assured.

The fall into sin changed all that. Instead of blessing, mankind through His disobedience brought the curse of God on himself and on all the creatures of the earth. That curse received expression in the sweat and tears God mentioned in Genesis 3, as well as in sickness and death, and the plagues and calamities mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. In a word, because of sin mankind was expelled from God's holy presence so that he came to feel God's displeasure acutely. This judgment of God was God's righteous response to man's arrogant sin.

In His boundless mercy, the Lord was pleased to send His only Son from heaven to earth. Think it through: the miracle of Christ's coming is so wonderful. He'd been in glory with the Father from all eternity (John 17:2). But now, at the command of the Father, He left that glory to enter this fallen world, a world subject to the aches and pains we daily experience, a world subject to terrorist attacks, fear of global warming, and the tribulations that accompany an economic meltdown – all of which, let us not forget, are expressions of God's righteous judgment on our sins of the beginning and our sins of each day. Yet into this world the Son of God came, and then denied Himself so radically that He went to cross as *the Sinner* in our place. All the judgment upon sin that God's chosen ones deserve was poured onto Him so that He suffered hellish agony. Yet in the midst of such judgement Jesus Christ did not

collapse under God's heavy hand, but He atoned for sin and reconciled sinners to God. So He cried out His words of victory, "It is finished," bowed His head and sovereignly gave Himself to death. Through His bitter sacrifice sinners –you and I– were reconciled to God and so receive the blessed gift of life. As proof that His sacrifice in fact atoned for sin, He arose from the dead on the third day.

And then?? Yes, He gathers a church for Himself. *But the people He gathers remain sinners* – and so attract the judgment of God upon themselves. What shall Jesus then do? Remain on this earth to teach us and to comfort us? *The headquarters of the entire world are in heaven*, for there God almighty is enthroned and from there He rules the world according to what people deserve. *And what people continue to deserve of themselves is God's judgment, God's plagues*. Since the headquarters of the world is in heaven, Jesus the Saviour went to heaven, *went to where the action begins*, so that there He might continue the work accomplished on Calvary.

What it is He does in heaven? This: He knows human nature so well for He was Himself tempted in every way even as we are. And He knows that God His Father is too holy to look upon any sin, including the sins of those for whom the Son came into the world. So what does He do? *In heaven He intercedes on behalf of God's chosen ones*.

Here, brothers and sisters, is the fulfilment of the work of the Old Testament priest. That priest of the Old Testament slaughtered the animal on behalf of the sinful Israelite, and in so doing sought God's grace on behalf of the sinner; instead of the sinner receiving the judgment he deserved the priest pursued God's blessing for him. Hence the words of Hebrews 9: Christ at His ascension entered the Most Holy Place, heaven itself, not with the blood of goats or calves but with His own blood (vs 12). That is why, the passage continues, "Christ is the mediator of the new covenant", for He died to free His own from the burdens of sin (vs 15).

What, then, may we understand Christ to be doing in heaven? What's so wonderful about His being in heaven that the disciples could be filled with joy? Christ, congregation, is *addressing holy, sovereign God* –He justly pours out His plagues upon the earth– *on behalf of those for whom He died, that the Father not deal with us as we deserve*. And No, He does not remind the Father of how much we try to do the right thing throughout the week or how faithfully we attend church on Sunday or even how big our contribution to the collection was this afternoon. Rather, the basis of His plea on our behalf is His own work on the cross nearly 2000 years ago. He reminds the Father that the Father has poured out on Jesus Christ the judgment we deserve, and He satisfied that justice, did not collapse under its weight, so that we are in fact reconciled to God. He speaks to God *about us* in the light of *His mighty work of redemption accomplished on Calvary*.

And here is the delightful consequence: the God who sits enthroned above the heavens, the God who controls good things and bad, *always hears His Son's intercessions on our behalf*. That's the glorious promise of Scripture: "if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins..." (1 John 2:1f). More, the God of heaven always hears His Son; "ask, and it shall be given to you," He said (Luke 11:9; cf John 15:7).

How, then, shall the Father lead your life? Shall He continue to deal with you as your sins deserve? No, beloved, He shall not, *because the Son pleads with Him on your behalf*. Because of His intercession, you have again the blessing of God – not just on the day you die, but in this life, daily, *now!*

You see: what happens in heaven is so critically important for your well-being today! If Jesus Christ would not intercede for you, you would remain under the heavy hand of God's judgment simply because you continue to sin. That is why the disciples delighted so much in Jesus' ascension! That He was in heaven, in the headquarters of life, was far more important than that Jesus spend more time in

the backwaters of Galilee. That Jesus be where the buttons of life are pushed, be there from whence come blessing and curse, *that* was wonderful indeed!

But now an obvious consequence follows. It's this: if Christ is in heaven interceding on my behalf, I have every right – nay, I have every *responsibility*– to be a man of prayer, a man who dares to speak with the God of heaven and earth about the bits and pieces of this life. This is the consequence that the author of Hebrews draws out after He's mentioned Christ's ascension in chap 9. For he continues his argument till he reaches this conclusion in chap 10: "therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us draw near to God* with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith..." (Hebrews 10:19ff). "Let us draw near to God," he says, and we understand that that's a reference to prayer. As Adam and Eve spoke with God in the beginning about the bits and pieces of their daily work in the Garden, so we may speak to God again about anything and everything that's on our minds. The frustration of a broken washing machine, the pain of overhearing someone's unpleasant comment, the disappointment of not being invited out, the struggles you experience in getting a plan together for the future: you can lay it again before Him who controls all history, and He will hear. Yes, it will come to God crookedly and marred with sin, but Jesus Christ has ascended for this express purpose that He might take our broken prayers and present them to the Father as an acceptable offering to Him on our behalf. And for His sake the Father answers!

How encouraging for a broken, sinful people! Here is every reason to give ourselves constantly to prayer, fully convinced that for Jesus' sake the Father most definitely hears us! Prayer: it's the blessed fruit of Jesus' ascension. More, because of His intercession the Father will bless us instead of curse us; life has lost its shadows because of Jesus' ascension into heaven! Then yes, storms still happen. But the child of God believes that they happen not as expressions of the judgment of God on our sins (for Christ has taken that judgment on Himself), but they happen because God works all things for the good of His people. Here is glorious gospel indeed!

2. In heaven is our Home

According to Scripture, there is more to the importance of heaven than that Jesus Christ is interceding there on our behalf with the God of this world. His intercession on our behalf implies that life as the naked eye sees it on this earth will not continue forever; more, what our eyes see and our hands touch is not as good as it gets. How so??

Back again to Paradise. The God who created Adam and Eve in the beginning did not intend *distance* between Himself and the creature He formed to image Him; rather, He came habitually to Adam and Eve in the Garden to speak with them about whatever was on their minds in their service to their Lord and Master. Their fall into sin destroyed that openness, that bond, so that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, and so expelled too from the presence and nearness of the Lord.

But this was a reality with which the almighty Creator was not pleased. So He sent His only Son to earth to reconcile sinful man to God. To achieve that goal, the Son of God became true man, one of us, "like His brothers in every way, ... yet was without sin" (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). So human was He that the people with whom He grew up knew Him simply as "the son of Joseph" (John 6:42). Yet at the same time this Jesus of Nazareth remained what He'd been, true God. Just how He was fully God and at the same time as real a human as you and me is beyond our understanding – and that again is OK since we need not comprehend God; if we could understand all things about God He would not be so great after all.

But the point is now that this Jesus of Nazareth –true God who became human, a true man who was and remained sovereign God– ascended into heaven. The result is that in the presence of God today is a real human being – and *He's allowed to stay there*. Recall: because of the fall into sin the human race was exiled from God's presence. But Christ Jesus is welcome in His presence because of His triumph on the cross. And caught in the reality of His being welcome in the presence of God is the good news of our being welcome in God's presence! Before He went to the cross to atone for sin Jesus spoke to God on behalf of His people with these words; said He, "Father, I want those you have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory you have Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). And make no mistake, congregation: the Father always heeds the petitions of the Son! So the apostle Paul can tell the saints of Ephesus that Christ was not the only one to ascend into heaven; in principle, he says, we have also already ascended into the presence of God. That's Ephesians 2:6: "God raised us up with Christ [from the dead] and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." There's much that can be said about that text, but at a minimum this text means that *our place is in heaven*, that is our home – as per Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17. So much has the Father answered the prayer of the Son that already our home is heaven!

That's why in turn the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross could assure that criminal-become-believer crucified next to Him that "today" (for both men would die soon) "you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). That's also why Paul could look forward to death. "To me," he wrote, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" – gain because it is "to be with Christ" in the glory of heaven. And what makes being with Christ in the glory of heaven so wonderful is ultimately not that there's no tears there and no pain or brokenness, but what makes it so wonderful is the presence of God Himself – being with Him again as it was in Paradise.

But it's equally clear from Scripture that in the presence of God the treasures of this earth and of this life are worth not a thing. Houses, cars and wealth cannot come with us into the presence of God, and so it's obvious that houses, cars and wealth are not what life and existence is all about. Friends, marriage and children give so much pleasure and significance to life, but even such relations do not come with us into the presence of God. In fact, when we depart this life to enter the presence of God such relations mean nothing, because in God's presence God is everything. The obvious consequence of that reality is simply this: I shall not live this earthly life as if money or property or holidays or children or marriage is everything, is the best that it gets. *It isn't!* Exactly because there's something so much better down the track, my focus shall stay on that Better, and I'll look forward to it eagerly.

You see, confessing the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven has more consequences than that I give myself to prayer. His ascension means my ascension into the presence of God, and that prospect is so inviting, so exciting, that I no longer want to get bogged down by the demands and distractions of this life. My focus is my God; in heaven is my home!

Hence our third point:

3. In heaven is our Focus

After Jesus Christ had been ten days in the presence of His Father in heaven, He poured out His Holy Spirit. Through His Spirit the Christ who departed to heaven has come to live with His own. That is: though Christ is in heaven in His human nature, He is at the same time never absent from us in His divine nature. That's His word to the disciples before His ascension; "Lo, I am with you always."

The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians about the coming of the Spirit in the remarkable words of 2 Corinthians 1:22. Says Paul: Christ "set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as

a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” The term ‘deposit’ catches the practice of our culture when you make a major purchase, say, a car. You put down a deposit of, say, \$1000, which guarantees to the dealer that you’ll come back with the rest of the money and guarantees to you that the dealer will keep the car for you till you finalize your finances. The Holy Spirit, then, is the \$1000 guaranteeing that far more is coming; He’s the Lord’s pledge that one day we’ll receive the fullness of glory with the Father and the Son in heaven. Talk about incentive to stay excited about the pleasures to come!

Yet there’s more. For the Holy Spirit makes it His work to direct our focus to the exalted Christ. And yes, the Christ He would have us fixed upon is in heaven. Hence the apostle’s words in Colossians 3: “Set your hearts on things above” (vs 1). And again, vs 2: “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” This earth: it directs our attention to things we see, things that make us feel good, things that satisfy our fallen, depraved natures. Says Paul: your Saviour is in heaven, and so you’re to focus your attention there. Result?? “Put to death, *therefore*, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.” What sort of things that might be? Paul lists some examples: “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (vs 5). He continues the list in vs 8: “rid yourselves of ... anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.” These are the sorts of things that bring upon you the judgment of the God you offended in the beginning. But, says Paul, since Christ is in heaven interceding for you, and since heaven is your destination, *live now like a citizen of heaven*. So: though you live on this sin-filled earth, imitate the very Christ who ascended from earth into heaven for your advantage. That is: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you...” (vs 12f). The point of it is clear: since the Christ who saved you has ascended into heaven, you need on this earth to live a lifestyle that shows that your heart is in heaven, that you expect to follow your Saviour into heaven to see for yourself the glory Jesus has with the Father. With your heart in heaven your effort can’t get stuck in the toys of this life, for this life is simply *not as good as it gets*. You’re looking forward eagerly to the better that’s coming, and already living with one foot in the presence of your Saviour.

What it all means? The ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven has given the child of God a heaven-centred approach to life. The headquarters of the universe are in heaven, and there your Saviour is interceding for your benefit – and so you can converse with God about all the ups and downs of your life. More, already your home is in heaven, so that you need not get absorbed by the demands and pleasures of this life. More still, your focus is so much fixed on heaven that on earth you live as a citizen of heaven, holy to God in all you do.

The disciples delighted in Jesus’ ascension; they understood its rich implications. And you?? We’re allowed to rejoice just as much! And that affects very much how we live and think and talk and sing!