



Worship at Home—24 May 2020

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Welcome to our worship wherever you may be, whether that is in Currie or further afield. My name is Grant Gordon and I am an elder in Currie Kirk. While our worship focuses on the Ascension of Jesus, let us first come together in our Call to Worship.

Call to Worship

We enter this worship, fragrant with the scents of God's creation.
We enter this worship with our minds filled with the pictures of our lives.
We enter this worship with concerns on our hearts and tensions in our bodies.
We enter this worship knowing that You Lord are with us always.

SONG – Come, Christians, join to sing (Words on separate sheet)

PRAYER

Loving God, if we come to Your house we would find Your door open because You are the everlasting Lord who does not faint or grow weary. But You also come to us as sure as dawn follows darkness, as sun follows moon, as birdsong follows night's silence, You are there, bringing light and life, breath and growth, energy and expectancy into our lives. We praise You that all around us is the beauty of creation carved out of love. We thank You that Your own feet touched this earth and felt its power and its pain. We rejoice that You move within us even before we speak Your name.

Merciful Lord, we stand before You in our human weakness. We confess that we have been caught up in the pride and presumption that drives our worldly society. Free us from the arrogance that afflicts our age, for now we stand confounded by conditions beyond our control or understanding.

But so often Lord we confess that our words and actions let You down. A foolish word, a thoughtless, hurtful comment, a misguided action, a quick judgement; Lord, we ask that through Your mercy You will forgive our sins.

So accompany us, that our minds may be enlightened by Your truth, our hearts may be warmed with Your love, our lives may be empowered by Your grace; so that we may love You and our neighbour more.

This prayer we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

The Scripture Readings are taken from Isaiah 40:31 and Acts 1:6-11 (Ascension of Jesus)

UP, UP AND AWAY

Before we explore the account of the Ascension and what it means for us today, let us join our hearts and minds in prayer.

Loving God, breathe your Spirit upon us that we may receive your Word afresh and anew. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. This we ask in your name. Amen.

So here in Acts we have this wonderfully descriptive picture for in one moment Jesus is engaged in animated conversation with his friends and then in a twinkling of an eye he seems to be enveloped in cloud as though he were on some kind of heavenly escalator and is removed from their presence. They stood staring into the skies, mouths wide open as Jesus left them. He was gone. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, had no video camera, he was not trying to create for us a photograph, but more of an impressionist's painting of what took place that very strange day, a day laced with many moods, of mixed emotions, of happiness and of sadness, of leave taking and of home coming.



Airport lounges, train terminals, bus stations, goodbye places are all awkward and painful places. Handshakes, hugs, the kiss of tears, the prayer of embrace, and you let go. It's just a wave goodbye from a distance and then they are gone. In our reading from Acts the friends of Jesus stand in the terminal, the place of letting go. Jesus may have completed his work on planet earth but very few of us ever enjoy the luxury of coming to the end of even our most productive day and saying, "I've accomplished everything I set out to do today." Instead, most of us have a long list of things we hope to get done someday. However, maybe lockdown has to some extent spurred us on to undertake some of these jobs like tidying the garage or the attic we intended to clean out last winter or perhaps many winters ago. Very seldom can we just sit back, fold our arms, and say, "I've completed everything I set out to do." But Jesus could do that. Jesus could say, "I have done everything that God wanted me to do on earth". And what a list of achievements; in the wilderness, he conquered sin; on the Cross, he conquered death; in the grave, he conquered hell; behind him the persecution of men; before him, the applause of angels; behind him, a cross; before him, a crown; behind him, Calvary; before him, all of heaven's glory.

But in today's questioning and interrogating world many people would ask, "Where is Jesus now? or Where are you God?" Never more so than now as the rampaging Coronavirus has taken so much, brought normal life to a halt, no longer are we able to spend time with our extended family or meet with friends and over 35,000 people have lost their lives in the UK. Behind the statistics are families torn apart by grief, millions worried about their loved ones, their jobs, their communities and their futures.

The Bible tells us: "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day," or "This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it." All this Scriptural truth is more easily quoted than done. How can we develop such trust in God that we are able to let go of the past, especially when some of us now feel the past was wonderful? How are we ever able to let go of our fears and anxieties about tomorrow and trust God with the future? How can we live today, this day, the only day we really have, as God intends us to live?

Well, we could start with faith, for if we believe that Jesus is dead, then our faith will be dead too. If we believe that he is way off in heaven and not here, we will not look for his work in our lives. And if we look to the Scriptures for the answer, the answer is not what we might have expected, or hoped for, or perhaps even prayed for. We are told "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage."

Wait. Waiting that's hard to do. I remember the key would barely be in the car engine ignition, when I would hear the words from the back seat: "How much longer? When are we going to get there?" How much longer? It is a question that belongs to more than little children who are easily bored on trips.

Waiting is the prayer of Covid-19 wards, overstretched Care Home staff, furloughed workers fearful for their jobs, maternity wards, prison cells. It is the prayer of those waiting for chemotherapy treatment, or the ache of grief to ease. It is the prayer of pupils and students anxious about results following a different examination process. It is the prayer of artists waiting for the spark of inspiration in front of an empty canvas; of refugees waiting to go back to their homeland not knowing what they will find.

In the Acts passage that was the question the disciples asked. How much longer until the Roman rule ends? How much longer until we are free and there is justice? "Lord," they asked, "will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" It was their version of the same old question: "How much longer?"

Jesus' response to the disciples was: "Only God knows." But then Jesus made them a promise, a promise that gave their lives purpose: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." This is the promise Jesus gave to them and to us. It is a promise of power and purpose for our living. It is not a promise that our problems will end. It is a promise that even in the midst of those problems, God will empower us so that our living fulfils God's purposes, so that we can continue the work Jesus began on earth.

For if we believe Christ is alive and well and dwelling among us, then he will be alive and present for us. We will be open to the life transforming love and grace that he brings. Then, like his disciples, we too will be able to go into the world and be witnesses to his love and grace, safe and secure in the knowledge that we have a friend at Court, our elder brother so to speak, in the very presence of God. If you feel that you have been let down and there is no one to stand by your side and defend you and uphold you, there is One who will never forsake you; if you feel sometimes that life is very much against you, that you are living in a pressure cooker world, that the stress of lockdown is beginning to take you out, there is One who never forgets you because that One holds us before the Father's love, world without end, and never fails remembering us before the Father. That's what Jesus is doing right now in his continuing work in heaven, the place all Christians hope to graduate to.

History is the public domain of God's sovereignty. Long before the American General, Douglas MacArthur said it, Jesus, the Christ, in effect, said: "I shall return!" As Christians we believe that the One who left us on Ascension Day is the One who comes to us on that day of his return. But for the meantime, we are given the gift of the Spirit which is the Lord's new way of being present with us through that mysterious, dynamic, powerful, transforming, probing, niggling, annoying, challenging and confronting reality, the promised One, the helper who the Father sent in Jesus' name, that's what Ascension is all about. And that gift enables the fulfilment of the Scriptures promise that "those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Confident in that promise, let us happily, gladly, but humbly, accept the mantle of God's stand-ins here on earth. So be it. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

O God of blazing light and dazzling darkness, we turn to You our beginning and our end; our source of all good things, whose gifts to all the world are held in outstretched open hands. And so Lord we pray for our world and its people.

As the world continues to struggle with the Coronavirus pandemic we pray for all who mourn that they may be conscious of You holding them in Your comforting arms. We bring before You all those caught up in the fear, anxiety and suffering that this illness generates. We give grateful thanks for the medical and care teams working with Covid-19 patients and ask that You would mitigate the risks to their lives that this work involves. We remember all our key workers and the service they provide, no longer as safe an experience as it once was. We pray for researchers working to identify a vaccine to combat the illness and for those who have volunteered to participate in clinical trials; keep them safe.

Lord, we pray for the impact lockdown can have on people; jobs, livelihoods and businesses are at risk, bringing stress, strain and tensions within families. We pray for parents, some working from home, but also undertaking home schooling which for many is a difficult experience as children not only miss the company of their friends but the discipline of the classroom. We give thanks for foodbanks and soup kitchens that help feed those who struggle to cope financially. We bring before You those suffering domestic violence and abuse and those who turn to alcohol or drugs for comfort. The past week was devoted to mental health issues and we ask that You would stand along-side those who find this time of social isolation in all its complexities difficult to cope with.

We pray for our political leaders and scientists as they deal with a multiplicity of issues and ask that You would guide their thoughts as they make and implement decisions on the easing of lockdown likely to begin in the next few days or so.

Lord, we pray for Your church in all its diversity. We thank you for the new opportunities that lockdown has opened up for worship and for increased numbers of people to hear the Gospel message through on-line services or other forms of social media. We pray that the church will grasp these opportunities and through creative and imaginative thinking use technology and all its various communication channels in as many areas of church life as possible.

We pray also for the new Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair. Lord, as his moderatorial year begins the Church finds itself in uncharted waters having to re-imagine church and having to venture beyond the familiar and comfortable. Give the Moderator vision, energy, and wisdom.

While the storms of life may come and go, Lord You have declared that your kingdom is coming among us; open our ears to hear it, our hands to serve it, our hearts to hold it. All these prayers we ask in Jesus' name and now let us join together in the words of the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

BLESSING

As the dew falls in the morning, so may the grace of God descend upon us.

As the sun bathes all in its life-giving light, so may the radiance of Christ shine in our hearts.

As the wind blows where it will, so may the breath and fire of the Spirit move freely in our lives.

Living God, work in us, and with us, and through us, to your glory. Amen.