

17th May 2026 – Ascension Day

Ephesians 1:19-23

ABOVE IN LOVE

If you were to suddenly, somehow, gain power or control so you could do whatever you wanted to over your financial situation, or a group of people, or even your direction in life, what would you do? What would your first thoughts be about how you would use that power or control? Do you first think, ‘wow, how can I now use this situation to help other people?’, or, ‘wow, what can I now do for myself from this?’ I’m guessing, given the way human nature often works, many of us would think towards the more selfish direction first (I confess, I probably would). It’s what we see in other people, isn’t it? We have the saying, ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. We’ve seen many times throughout history and still today where someone who begins with a desire to make change for all people comes to a position of authority they then, not always but often enough, end up being seduced and trapped by the opportunities and enticements their position now brings them. Think about our own political leaders; while they don’t normally in our country use their positions to benefit themselves in money or wealth, it does seem that sometimes the ideals they originally had are sold out in doing and saying things which will see them be continually re-elected and holding on to their power.

There are plenty of exceptions to this, including a few in the Bible. It always amazes me that Joseph, who was sold by his brothers into slavery which led to many years languishing in prison, when he years later finds himself in a position of holding the power of life and death over those brothers, he forgives them! Although he was an arrogant young man, Joseph’s climb to power makes him much more humble. And young King Solomon, when God said he could have whatever he wanted, instead of asking for military power or great riches, Solomon asked for the wisdom and compassion which would make him a good king for God’s people. Sadly though, as Solomon’s power

and wealth grew, in later years he did turn away from God and his care for God's people. Again, there are, still today, many exceptions to this, but given the nature of our human nature when we are given any kind of power there is always that temptation there to use it for ourselves in some way.

To have someone then be Above in Love, is not what we always expect to happen, but this sums up what Jesus' Ascension is all about. Ascension Day is often described as the 'Forgotten Festival' of the Christian Church: in our country it doesn't have a public holiday. We don't normally have a worship service on the day it falls, always Thursday (40 days after Easter Sunday), so we normally, when we remember, celebrate it the following Sunday. You most likely can't name an Ascension Day song, like we can with Christmas and Easter. It doesn't involve the exchanging of gifts or even chocolate, or special meals and celebrations with family friends. As an event it is often overlooked and forgotten, and even, I confess, those of us who do put strong emphasis on its significance in some years have let it pass by without even realising. Most likely if you were to talk to many people outside the Church, and even in the Church, about the importance of Ascension Day, you would get the response one of my four-year-old granddaughters likes to give; 'Wait, what?'

Ascension Day is the culmination, the completion, the crowning glory, of Jesus' ministry on earth. In Jesus' earthly life there are five key events; His incarnation (Mary becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit), His birth, His death, His rising again, and His ascending back into heaven, that are absolutely essential to Jesus' role in God's plan to save all people, so that if we were to take out one of them the rest would mean nothing. Ascension Day is the day when Jesus, having been born as one of us, lived our life going through all we go through, showed His human and divine side in the things He said and did, gave His life as the innocent Lamb sacrificed to pay for the sins of all people, and then was raised to new life by the power of God to open the way to new life for us also, after all that has happened in the last 33 years, Jesus is taken back to heaven in glory, ready for the next stage of God's plan, the coming of the Holy Spirit (more on that next week). It is a day when we remember that God did all He had promised, Jesus achieved all He was sent down to achieve, and we know that the next part of God's plan to save all people is about to begin.

In our reading here from Ephesians 1, Paul refers to Ascension Day by talking about God showing His power in raising Jesus to heaven and giving Him power over all things. Ascension Day is about power. As we said earlier, absolute power being given to, or taken by, anyone is something which can worry us a bit given what we sometimes see and experience in our world. But for God, it's not about power for its own sake, it is power for the sake of love. We can say that love is God's super-power. Rather than think that Jesus now rules in a way that is going to put us down, keep us in control, move us around in a way which we might not like but suits his purposes, we know that Jesus now rules in love for our good and our care.

Now having that power overall, Jesus now rules Above in Love, remembering also that, through the Holy Spirit (again, more on that next week), He is also with us at all times and in all things. One way for us to look at this is for us to put ourselves in the picture of Jesus' Ascension, receiving the light of His power and love coming into our hearts. If Ascension is the 'so what?' of all those other parts of Jesus' life, what does it now mean for us? What comfort does it give to us? You might think of the forgiveness we have through Jesus' death for us. The freedom from guilt in knowing the price of all of our sins has been paid. The comfort, strength and guidance in the risen and ascended Saviour giving us peace, hope, and joy by His love in our hearts whatever we go through. The assurance in knowing that because He is in heaven He is everywhere; 'with you always' as He promised when He left the disciples. What do all of these things, and perhaps other parts of Jesus now ruling Above in Love, what do they mean to you? Has there ever been a part of your life when you really leant on and gained support from that peace and hope Jesus' love and power gives to us? Is it something you feel you really need right now?

And, as we put ourselves into this picture, not only do we receive God's love and power in our hearts through Jesus, we are also now called to be a part of helping others to know what it's all about. At the end of our reading Paul writes, 'The church is the body of Christ and is filled with Christ who completely fills everything.' (23) The Church, all believers together, is the body of Jesus, in other words we are completely connected to Him and who He is. Is that what people always see?

Is that what we always experience? Is that what we always help other people to experience? Everything Jesus does is done in love. How might we change our thoughts, our words, our attitudes, our actions, both to people outside the Church and also those inside if we always have this same beginning point; love? As we reflect on God's love and power shown in Jesus' Ascension, and how that now comes into our hearts, what might God be calling us to change, what relationships is He calling to us re-examine, what priorities to re-order, into what situations could we be called to show more love? God's love for us in Jesus is there, if it needed more of a guarantee, in Jesus we have the absolute assurance of that. The hope that comes into our hearts through Jesus means that we are now able to receive all the blessings God wants to give us. As His body, as His people, we now share this love and hope also.

There is, I confess, a very good chance that next year I am going to have to be very conscious of not forgetting Ascension Day (as I have previously), as important as it is to us. But, thank God, even when we do forget these events God's love is still there for us. What we don't forget, what we hold on to in our lives, is that in His love and power, God raised Jesus so that we can know all His love and blessings in our lives. As God's people, because that is what He makes us, we can know this, we can live in this, and we can share this. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Can you think of examples, either in history or today, when people have let power go to their heads and cause them to use that power for themselves? Can you think of examples of when that wasn't the case?
- What does Jesus' Ascension mean to you? Is there a particular aspect of Jesus being raised in power and love that you find to be a comfort and strength in your life?
- As Jesus rules Above in Love, we know we receive His love in our lives. We know also that we are called to show and share His love? Is there a particular relationship or situation in which God is calling you to do this more, even if that is uncomfortable for you?

Pray: thank God that Jesus did all God sent Him to do, and was then raised again in power and love. Ask God to help us to hold on to all this means for us, and to continue to know and show His power and love in our lives.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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