

CHRIST'S LAST EARTHLY MINISTRY TO HIS CHURCH

“Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands, He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God”.

(Luke 24: 50-53)

We come now to the biblical description of the ascension of Christ. The moment of the ascension was a very important moment for Christ and for the church. We might even draw a direct line from the moment of the ascension to the closing of every church service every Sunday.

Let me explain this. What happens when we conclude the worship services? Two main things, really. We praise the Name of the Lord in our closing song, and we receive the blessing of the Lord via the servant who is authorized to do so. Blessing and praise form the final acts of the service in which the preaching of *reconciliation* is central.

Do we not find the same elements in this text from Luke, which describes the ascension of our Lord? Christ has brought His congregation together in Bethany, on the mount of Olives, united now in the wonderful reality of reconciliation. It is well after Golgotha and Easter. Christ has performed the highest priestly service in His one sacrifice on the cross. He has gathered His disciples around Him again and proclaimed to them grace and life.

Now the time has come to part. Christ must enter into the glory of heaven; the church must take up its earthly task. And at this very moving moment in the history of the church, we read of *blessing and praise!* It is a fitting conclusion of Christ's earthly ministry.

After the one high-priestly sacrifice on the cross comes the full priestly blessing. The church will live on earth under that blessing. And this blessing will activate the church and call it to continuous praise and worship, until He comes again to judge the living and the dead. Our theme is, then, that Christ in His ascension as the only High Priest performs His last earthly service to His church. In doing so, He places His church under His continuous blessing and He incites His church to His continuous praise.

A SOBER DESCRIPTION

It is striking that the ascension is described in such simple and sober terms, even though it is actually one of the greatest moments in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the history of the church. There is no extensive report, no elaborate description or documentation. Luke devotes only four verses to the event, of which just one actually records the fact of the ascension, namely verse 51. That's all. We will notice the same sobriety in Acts 1, where the event of the ascension is also described.

This brevity stands in marked contrast to the broad and expansive description of Christ's suffering. While Christ's suffering on the cross is extensively documented, his moments of glory are soberly described. His suffering *had* to be described broadly, fully and clearly, for on the cross He performed his foremost priestly deed. There He gave the one perfect sacrifice of body and soul. But even if the fact of the ascension is described in sober terms, it is still a moving account. Luke brings out Christ's final act as a simple, yet stirring priestly act.

TO THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

We read that the Lord has led His disciples out as far as Bethany. Luke does not say that they arrived in Bethany, but that they went in that direction. They went out of Jerusalem, most likely through the so-called “golden gate” in the temple wall, and then through the Garden of Gethsemane to the Mount of Olives, in the direction of Bethany.

There Christ will ascend to heaven, in the midst of His disciples. Christ was crucified *outside* Jerusalem. There He performed His greatest priestly task and there He will also perform His last priestly act on earth. It is now no longer a matter between Him and the Jews, but between Him and His Bride, between the Lord and His church.

There they stand, the Lord Jesus and His church, His disciples and (according to Acts 1) possibly some of the women and a few relatives of the Lord. It is a relatively small group of people, the first of the Lord’s great “harvest.” They stand there together, sharing in the wonder of the risen Christ, in the wealth of the new covenant, yet also isolated from the rest of Israel. Apart from Christ and each other, they are “on their own.”

SAYING GOODBYE

Are they “impressed” with what is going to happen? They know that the Lord will depart, because He spoke about it many times before, even before His crucifixion. The moment of “farewell” is always a difficult moment, and here, after so many emotional events, it will have been particularly difficult.

It is hard to say “goodbye.” In such a situation you usually see one of two reactions: one person becomes quiet and looks at the floor, not knowing really what to do or say, while another person, doing exactly the opposite, loses himself in a torrent of words and hides the pain under a cloak of frantic activity. To say “goodbye” is indeed a difficult matter.

And what about Christ Himself? How does He react to this situation? Is He going to give the disciples one last stirring speech? Will He make one last round, and shake their hands, one by one, with a last personal message? “Peter, tend my lambs.” “John, remember my love.” “Thomas, stand firm.” “Mary, be courageous!” Is there a final admonition and a word of comfort? Some people tarry long when they have to go away.

But we do not read of any of these things. I rather have the impression that everything has now been said. Christ approaches His followers not one by one but as a body. They are all in the same situation now, and all are in need of the same thing. Christ does what they may not have expected – or did they? We read, “and lifting up His hands, He blessed them” (verse 50b).

THE FULL BENEDICTION

The blessing with the uplifted hands! This was the well-known priestly blessing given in the temple *after the sacrifice was brought!* When the people were

gathered outside on the temple square, and the smoke of the altar with the incense was still drifting towards heaven, the priest would come out, lift up his hands and say, “The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD lift up His countenance over you. . .and give you peace.” And the people would say, “Amen.”

We should note that Christ has never before given such a priestly blessing. We read elsewhere that He laid His hands upon children to bless them, but that was of a different nature than this blessing. But now He gives the full priestly blessing. Because now He has, as the only high priest, brought the perfect sacrifice and the one atonement for the sins of His people and reconciled them to the LORD.

Our Lord may now, *must* now, before He parts from His people, lift up His hands to give them the priestly blessing. And now for the first time this blessing is truly based on the one given sacrifice, not on the blood of oxen or sheep or bulls, but on the blood of the Lamb of God! Now the blessing of God comes to the church with full effect and in true force. This is the ultimate goal of the priestly office: to let the people of God go to their homes reconciled and blessed.

SAYING GOOD WORDS

Is this simple priestly act not richer than a thousand words? For this is something to hold fast to. With this blessing you can go out into the world and live your life. Christ departs for the glory of heaven, but He leaves His church behind under the full blessing of achieved reconciliation. He places His church under His outstretched arms; the church *is* under His blessing, officially and permanently. This is the most beautiful “going away” gift or “farewell present” anyone could give or receive!

“He blessed them.” Literally it says, “He spoke good words.” That is what “blessing” really is: saying good things to someone, wishing them the best. The best to you every day. The same Greek word is later used for “praising.”

Saying good things. When God does that, it is called “blessing.” When we do that, it is called “praising.” But Christ’s blessing is more than just a matter of a few words: it is the blessing of the covenant, of the new covenant. It implies great spiritual gifts, such as the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting, and from there on all that is needed to live a joyful and meaningful life before the Lord. To be blessed means: to stand in the communion of the living God in Christ and through the Spirit, day and night. Blessed also means: to stand in the communion of faith with one another, even after Christ has ascended into heaven.

THE PERMANENT BLESSING

Christ may go, but the blessing is permanent. See verse 51, “*While* He blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried into heaven.” Christ’s hands stay outstretched as He ascends! It is another contrast with the priest in the temple. The priest had to lower his hands again between each sacrifice. But now the last sacrifice has been brought, and the arms remain extended, for the blessing is continuous, permanent and never-ending.

Christ departs, and the disciples see Him go with outstretched arms and open hands, arms which never drop and hands that never close! Also after He arrives in heaven, and is seated on the throne of God, the blessing does not cease. A rich stream of unending covenant blessings is poured out over the church. This last priestly act on earth finds a mighty progression from heaven.

This means that the church will never be poor, in the sense of being robbed of Christ's blessing. Here is the triumphant crowning of the cross of Golgotha: "that He might fill us with His blessing" (Form for Celebration of the Lord's Supper).

That is what we celebrate in remembering the ascension of our Lord. We stand today under the same outstretched arms and in the flow of the same blessing. That blessing, based on the reconciliation of Golgotha, is laid upon the congregation every Sunday again, and is with you every day, every week. That incites us to praise Him. He says "good words" to us; we say "good words" to Him.

NO REAL FAREWELL

This "farewell" is not really a farewell anymore, is it? This blessed departure has a beautiful result. The disciples are not broken-hearted; on the contrary, we read, "And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (verse 52). The ascension has not diminished, rather increased the joy of the church. Certainly, the disciples will have felt the pain of farewell and they will have missed the Lord's personal presence. But there is no sorrow, only great elation.

Great joy. That means: they have understood the blessing. They have gladly accepted the high-priestly blessing of Christ. They know that they have not gone a step backwards, but a great stride ahead. They have not been cut off from their Lord, but are eternally united with Him.

So they go back to Jerusalem with increased joy. When we read the words "great joy," we should not think that they were jumping up and down in ecstasy all the way back to Jerusalem. Some interpret this to mean an outpouring of outward emotions. But the word used means more a deep inward joy, and it has a close relation to the Greek word for "grace." It is God's grace in Christ which gives such deep joy and overcomes even the pain of Christ's departure. The disciples return to the same old city of Jerusalem, but life will never be the same again. Their hearts are filled with the grace of God and the joy of knowing the glory of the Lord.

WITH HEART AND MOUTH

And when the heart is thus filled with joy, the mouth pours forth praise! Christ's priestly blessing leads to prophetic praise by the church. The blessing of Christ activates and incites the church to praise.

This is an important matter. The blessing of Christ becomes evident in congregational activity. Christ speaks "good words" to His people; the action always originates with Him. But the church cannot remain without reaction or response; the church must then also speak "good words," must bless God and

praise the Lord. So the Christ who blesses and the congregation which praises are united in the service of the Father.

CONTINUALLY IN THE TEMPLE

For we read, “. . . and [they] were continually in the temple blessing [praising] God” (verse 53). Christ does not bring His church to tears on Ascension day but leads His church to praise, even continuous praise.

They were continually in the temple praising God. Please do not misunderstand this. Luke does not mean that they were there day and night, twenty-four hours. Of course not, for they had to go home, to eat, drink and sleep. The service of the Lord does not do away with the normal pattern of every day living. But Luke means “continually” in the sense of regularly, at set times, and also often.

The small congregation at Jerusalem is making itself known publicly. At set times they come together in the temple to praise the Lord for His grace in Christ. For a blessed church cannot hide its life but is a prophetic church, revealing its life in its worship and praise.

They do this in the temple. Is that not a bit strange? They received the blessing outside the temple, separate from the temple, why do they still sing their songs of praise inside the temple? Has the temple not become outdated and is its use now not obsolete?

It is indeed remarkable and therefore also important that the disciples are still at this time involved in the temple. The Old Testament temple is being filled with New Testament praise. Here we see the antithesis emerging between Judaism and Christianity. For it is Christ who demands and receives praise also in that old temple.

And this “continually.” Which implies: this congregation is not bound anymore to the temple liturgy. It does not have to wait for the daily sacrifice to be brought or for the priest of the day to come out and give the blessing. They are still in the temple, but they are already loose from the temple liturgy, and they may introduce a new liturgy, free from the altars, sacrifices, and priests. For this congregation is sanctified by the one great sacrifice and stands under the full blessing of the only High Priest, Jesus Christ.

They are still in the temple, indeed, for they still seek the unity with old Israel. But they worship in the style of the new Israel. And it will become more and more apparent that the praise of this church is not bound to places, times, offerings, or priests, but may be heard freely, everywhere and always.

A BEAUTIFUL CONCLUSION

Is this not a beautiful conclusion to a rich Gospel? Christ ascends to heaven, blessing His church, and the disciples return to Jerusalem to turn the old temple into a real house of God. It had to end this way. A blessed church is a prophetic church. A blessed church is a praising community. Out of a new heart rise the new songs of praise to God who made it all possible in Christ Jesus.

It has to be so, I say. Otherwise we lose the blessing. If the church is not active in praise and prophecy, the blessing is forfeited. Let us be a joyous, worshipping church. Our whole life is contained within the blessing of Christ, and our whole life must be geared to the praise of His glory. This is even more true for us today than it was on the day of ascension. For now the Spirit has been poured out and the revelation of God has been completed. We have come much further in the history of the church. The old temple in Jerusalem no longer exists. We worship in spirit and in truth, wherever the Lord calls us.

Now the blessing of Christ must be fully visible among us, in our worship, our psalms and praise, and also in our whole walk of life. It must become apparent that we live under the outstretched arms and open hands of the ascended Lord, that we expect and receive from Him all things, and that we give to Him all honour and praise. For through the ascension of Christ we are directed towards heaven, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

He blesses us from heaven, every day.

We praise God for it, every day. Continually. Now and forever. The congregation that lives under the constant blessing of Christ is always active in the service of the Lord.