

Luke 24:50-53

Ascension Day – May 10, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Leviticus 9:1-24; Acts 1:1-11

Hymn 40:1,2,3

Text: Luke 24:50-53

Amen-song: Hymn 42:1,2,3,4,5,6 (all)

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, Ascension Day is often understood as the celebration of the kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ. We sang Psalm 47: “God went up on high with a joyful cry, and the trumpet’s sound echoed all around. Now with loud acclaim magnify His name. Play the harp and sing, praise the LORD our King.” Ascension Day is coronation day for Jesus the Christ. He went to heaven to take His place, as human, at God’s right hand, on the throne of the cosmos. Matthew ends his Gospel with the royal claim of Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18b).

But there are other sides to Ascension Day as well. Besides the kingly, the royal aspect, there is also the priestly one. Christ ascended to heaven, not only to be there as *king*. He also ascended to heaven to be there as *priest*. On behalf of God He rules us, His people, and all creation. That’s the royal side. And on behalf of us, and all creation, He brings our cause before God. It is this priestly aspect to which Luke draws our attention in his Gospel.

On this score there is something very neat to the way Luke has put his Gospel together. Boys and girls, do you know what Luke first talks about in his Gospel? Here’s a hint: it’s about a priest. A priest in the temple who saw an angel. Yes, it was Zechariah. And remember what Zechariah was not able to do, after he had seen the angel? He could not give the blessing. He could not give the blessing. The Gospel of Luke begins with people leaving the temple confused and disappointed: they did not receive the blessing of their covenant God. And our text, the last verses of Luke, tell us of a blessing that was bestowed, and of disciples who went back to Jerusalem—not disappointed but—with great joy. Thus the Gospel of Luke becomes a whole: it goes from the failed blessing of Zechariah to the perfect blessing of the Christ.

We listen to the Gospel with this theme: The Great High Priest grants His church His blessing. We will consider (1) What precedes the blessing; (2) What happens during the blessing; and (3) The response to the blessing.

1) What precedes the blessing.

A blessing is not given lightly. If we consider the liturgical data of the Jewish religion, we learn that a blessing stands at the end. It is the almost last thing that happens. It’s what we learn, for example, from Leviticus 9. The context is the first ordination of the priests of the Lord. Leviticus 9 tells us what happened on the day Aaron and his sons became priests of God. There’s quite a few things that had to happen. For the priests had to be holy to God. Sacrifices had to be brought, both for Aaron and his sons and for God’s people. Blood had to flow for atonement and reconciliation. Three sacrifices were brought. First there was the sin-offering. This was the sacrifice by which people confessed their sins and sought reconciliation with God. Then there was the burnt offering. This was symbolic for complete dedication to God’s service. Just like the sacrifice was completely burned, so a person was to dedicate himself completely to God’s service. And finally the peace offering also known as the fellowship offering. It was symbolic for the fact that there was peace with God. Part of the sacrifice was burnt (God’s part). And by means of a wave motion part of it was received back from God for a feast for oneself. Three sacrifices: the sin offering with a view to justification (forgiveness), the burnt offering with a view to sanctification (dedication), and the peace offering with a view to glorification (God and man dwelling together). And only after all these

sacrifices had been brought does the blessing follow. Leviticus 9:22: “Then Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.” The blessing is always preceded by the sacrifice.

Leviticus 9 is the only place in Scripture where we find an extensive description of the liturgy of the tabernacle and temple. It is one of the few places that gives us a clear picture of when and how the blessing was given. Of course, this doesn’t mean that thereafter it never happened. The Gospel of Luke makes clear the priestly blessing was an important part of the temple liturgy. Zechariah, as priest, had been chosen to bestow the blessing on a certain day.

We also find an interesting reference to the priestly blessing in one of the apocryphal books. The apocryphal books are books that are very old and come from the Jewish tradition. They are not part of the Bible, but do contain very helpful information for us (more on that this Sunday afternoon). The best known of these apocryphal books is The Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus. In the second last chapter of this book Sirach describes the temple liturgy in the days of Simon the high priest, one of the Maccabees. It follows the pattern of Leviticus 9: first the sacrifices, then the blessing. Simon went up to the altar, other priests present him with the offerings. These were sacrifices. And then we read, “Then he would come down and raise his hands over the whole assembly of the Israelites, to give them the Lord’s blessings from his lips, being privileged to pronounce His name; and once again the people would bow low to receive the blessing of the Most High.” (Ecclesiasticus 50:20-21 – New Jerusalem Bible).

This is also the pattern we find in Luke 1. We see Zechariah standing by the altar of incense. That’s the altar signifying the prayers of God, how they pleased God. It’s only after consecration to God through prayer that the blessing can be bestowed.

What we learn from this is that there can be no blessing without sacrifice. A person could not receive God’s blessing if there had been no sacrifice. Reconciliation precedes the priestly blessing.

The *priestly* blessing. The blessing which Luke describes in our text is a special one. That is clear from the words which Luke used. We read “lifting up His hands He (Christ) blessed them.” There are many blessings in the Bible. Blessing was a common happening. A father would bless his children. Jesus blessed children. Psalms call upon us to “bless the Lord” (e.g. Psalm 103). But that’s a different kind of blessing. There’s no need for sacrifice before these blessings. You see, that is not the *priestly* blessing. The priestly blessing was special, and referenced with a special phrase. The phrase “to lift up the hands and bless”. We find that expression in Leviticus 9. We also find it in Ecclesiasticus. We don’t find it in Luke 1, because Zechariah wasn’t able to speak the blessing. But we do find it in our text, Luke 24.

Luke uses a liturgical expression to indicate that the blessing bestowed by the ascending Jesus Christ is the *priestly* blessing. And what does that mean, boys and girls? What precedes, what comes before the priestly blessing? Sacrifices. So, where are they?

Well, Ascension Day comes after Good Friday. Good Friday is about the ultimate sacrifice: the Great High Priest who sacrificed Himself. His own body was broken, His own blood poured out, for the complete forgiveness of all our sins (Romans 3).

And Ascension Day comes after Easter. Easter is about a sacrifice was well: the power of sin is broken, death no longer reigns, the possibility of a new life exists. We rise in newness of life (Romans 6), to serve, not sin, but God!

And Ascension Day also comes after the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the fellowship meal of God with His people. Christ ate with His disciples on several occasions after His resurrection – there is communion with the Holy One!

Sin offering, burnt offering, peace offering: they all foreshadowed the work of the Christ. And at the moment described in our text, those sacrifices, those liturgical events, had taken place. Not the shadows, but the reality. And thus, it’s time for the blessing!

And Jesus the Christ has every right to bestow that blessing. For He Himself is the Great High Priest. He

has sacrificed Himself, so that, eventually God's dwelling might be with man and this world might be a perfect place.

Isaiah (53:5) prophesied: "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." The prophet John the Baptist testified (John 1:29): "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The apostle Paul wrote (Colossians 1:20): "For God was pleased ... through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross."

Christ brought Himself as the sacrifice. Hebrews, a letter that reflects on the ministry of the Christ in the light of the liturgy of the tabernacle and temple, tells us this (Hebrews 5:8-10): "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." Jesus the Christ brought about reconciliation; He gained salvation for us, who believe on Him. And the last thing Christ did on earth for us as our worship leader, as our High Priest, is utter the blessing of God.

(2) We turn to the event of that blessing, to what happened as Christ gave the blessing.

I cannot stress it often enough, especially in a day and age where we want everything to be quick and easy: you've got to read the Bible text very closely, very carefully. I already mentioned that the expression "lifted up His hands" is a liturgical expression. Don't just read that and go on.

Now, there are more things like that.

For example, "And He led them out." The blessing is only for those who follow the Christ. Just as the blessing of the priest was only for God's people. For the blessing follows on the heels of the sacrifices, follows on the heels of reconciliation, and thus is only for those who have been reconciled to God. This is also emphasized in Numbers 6, where we read the text of the priestly blessing. The LORD told Moses: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless *the people of Israel*:" Same in our text. Christ blesses *the church*. He is not blessing the world. This is completely in line with what we read in the High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17. Said the Christ: "I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." (John 17:9). It is in this line that the Christ blesses His followers, blesses the church. Apostate, rebellious Israel, who crucified her Messiah, is not present. The circle of those who are blessed is a closed circle.

Something else we need to take careful note of are differences between the blessing bestowed by our Lord Jesus and by the priest. To realize this, you need to know that in Jesus' day the priestly blessing of Numbers 6 could only be bestowed with raised hands by a priest in the temple. During the exile the bestowing of the blessing had become a problem: there was no temple for the Jews to go to. So the custom arose for the blessing to be bestowed in the synagogue, the Jewish church, you might say. For, it was argued, the synagogue is an extension of the temple. But there was a difference. For example, only the priest had the privilege of "pronouncing the Name", of saying "Yahweh" (Ecclesiasticus 50:20). In the Synagogue, the name "Yahweh" would not be mentioned. Thus the priestly blessing in its pure form was only heard in the temple. But in our text we find the Lord Jesus and His disciples outside the temple, outside Jerusalem. Not only was the sacrifice brought by Christ, brought outside the gates (cf. Hebrews 13:12-13), the blessing is as well. The temple curtain had been torn, God no longer binds His earthly residence to the temple. We now worship God in spirit and truth, and not on this mountain or that (John 4:23). Thus the blessing is now given outside the city. We note further that the blessing, in the temple liturgy, was always bestowed at a certain time. Zechariah bestowed the blessing at the hour of prayer. But there is no time designation in our text. Not only is the place irrelevant, the time is irrelevant as well. And thirdly, the most obvious difference is that the priestly blessing is bestowed by one who is not a priest, a descendant of Aaron. Even a king was not allowed to presume the duties of a priest: King Saul and King Uzziah were punished severely for doing so. But that is not the case with Jesus the Christ. Even though He

is a king, a son of David, he has the right to bestow the blessing. Thus the blessing is disconnected from a particular place, from a particular time, and from a particular type of person.

There's something else that needs our attention. We read in our text "While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven." When a priest blessed the people he would raise his hands and bless them. And then he would lower his hands again, and everybody would go and do their thing. But Jesus never lowered His hands. *While* He blessed them He went to heaven. His hands continue to be outstretched over His people, even today. This is a blessing without end. The angels that appear to the disciples after the Ascension confirm this, for we will see Jesus return in the same manner that He ascended. That includes the outstretched hands blessing the church. Let me put it this way: Even today, right now, the outstretched hands of the Christ bestow the blessing of God on our lives. We today live under the blessing of God as bestowed by the Christ.

This implies, brothers and sisters, that today the blessing comes to us from the real temple of God. For when the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven, from the perspective of the High Priest, he entered the true Holy of Holies, the true Most Holy Place where the real throne of God is. Hebrews 8(:1-2) tells us: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man." This is where the Christ now intercedes for us. He pleads for us before the Father. "Father, these are the people You have given to Me. Do not take their sins into account but forgive them. Consider My blood the payment for their sins. Consider my works theirs. Let them live, holy lives, in communion with Us." Brothers and sisters, the beauty of it all is this: we no longer depend on some earthly ritual for justification, sanctification, glorification. That was the way of it during the Old Covenant dispensation. And when the priests failed, things went bad with Israel. Just think of the days of Eli the high priest, how his two sons spoiled things for Israel. But we don't have to be afraid that our service fails. The sacrifice which has been brought does not need to be repeated. We share in the sacrifice of Christ. Again I go to the letter to the Hebrews (10:19-23): "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

"While He blessed them" He ascended to the true temple. And as He went up, so the Spirit came down. To assure us of the Gospel, to grant us all those wonderful gifts: forgiveness, faith and renewal of our lives. To form the church of which we may be a part. And when Christ returns, the blessing will be fulfilled, filled out, be there in all its fullness. God's dwelling with man. Satan, sin, death, all evil banished. The blessing of our Saviour transcends the blessing of the Aaronite priest. For it is a blessing without end. We'll never ever need another High Priest again.

How shall we respond? That's our third consideration.

"He parted from them". Boys and girls, saying goodbye is never fun. When your grandparents live in another province or country, and they come and visit you, and then go again. That's no fun. Then again, usually you know you'll meet again. Or at least, the possibility of meeting again, even very soon, remains. But the Lord Jesus, He went to heaven. He was gone, truly gone. The disciples realized, they would not be seeing Him again, not in that familiar way.

Most people are sad when a dear one leaves. Boys and girls, were the disciples sad? No, not at all. They were happy. They were very happy. Luke tells us "They returned to Jerusalem with great joy." And why would they have been so joyful? Well, because they were receiving the perfect blessing. "I am with you until the end of the age." And that's exactly what the blessing of the LORD is all about, about God being with you in all you do. The Lord Jesus will never leave His church alone, even if, as far as His human body

is concerned, He is in heaven.

The reaction of the disciples is the right one. Again, Leviticus 9(:24). The blessing is bestowed. The LORD manifests his presence by consuming the sacrifices. “when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.” “Fell on their faces”, that’s a way of saying, “and worshiped.” Ecclesiasticus 50:21 and following is also worth noting. “And once again the people would bow low to receive the blessing of the Most High.” And then we read “Now bless the God of all things, the doer of great deeds everywhere, who has exalted our days from the womb and has acted mercifully towards us. May He grant us cheerful hearts and bring peace in our time.” Do you recognize these words? Poetically they’ve been rendered as follows: “Now thank we all our God, with hearts, and hands, and voices; who wondrous things has done, in whom His world rejoices, who from our mother’s arm, has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and still is ours today. O may this bounteous God, through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts, and blessed peace to cheer us.” And so on. Yes, our Hymn 85:1 & 2 are a rhymed version the response of God’s people to God’s blessing, as found in Ecclesiasticus 50.

And so the disciples were continually in the temple. True, the former things had been fulfilled. But the disciples were in a period of transition, a transition from old covenant to new covenant, a transition that would yet last some 40 years, until 70 AD when the temple was destroyed (cf. Hebrews 8:13). And there would yet be another milestone, the milestone of Pentecost. Then the Spirit of God would come mightily upon the people of God, and the Gospel would go out to all nations. The blessing of the Christ would extend over His people throughout the world. It would even reach the valley and the mouth of the Fraser River. And we too may rejoice on account of the blessing of our Lord and Saviour, our only High Priest.

Ascension Day: the Great High Priest grants His church His blessing.

When we go from here, we too receive the blessing of God. I too may raise my hands and pronounce the Name of God. The Aaronite priests did so as a foreshadowing of the blessing of the Christ. Ministers today do so as a reminder of the fact that the Christ continues to bless the church today. Let’s join the disciples in looking intently at the blessing Christ – you know, it’s actually not proper to bow your head and close your eyes when the minister bestows the blessing, for it’s not a prayer but a blessing – and let’s worship God with joy in all we do every day. For the blessing of God assures us that God is with us, and one day, will indeed dwell with us.

Amen.