

Overview of the Bible 8 – ‘We must obey God rather than men’: The Apostolic Church

Isaiah 56:6-8 / Psalm 86:1-13 / Acts 1:1-5 / Mark 3:13-19

Biblical books: Acts, Galatians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 4 September 2022

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Tonight is the eighth sermon in a series providing an overview of the whole Bible. Our theme tonight is the apostolic church, and I will be proclaiming a number of different New Testament texts, including those that we have just heard. Let's pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.

Recap and Introduction

“It is good that one man should die for the people” (John 11:50, 18:14). We heard those words last month, spoken by the High Priest Caiaphas. He was speaking approvingly of the prospect of the death of Jesus Christ, imagining that Jesus’ death would quieten the people of Israel, taking away a cause of disturbance and disruption. But in saying those words, Caiaphas was being unknowingly prophetic. For indeed it is good that one man, the God-man Jesus Christ, die for the sins of all people, including us. But it did not bring the peace and worldly stability that Caiaphas was necessarily hoping for. And tonight we’re looking at the explosion of activity, the apostolic church which we are a part of and which we confess, that followed after Jesus’ ministry. For the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was not the end of a momentary disturbance. Rather, it became the defining event of all of human history, and thrust the apostolic church into its mission. To use an analogy that both Jesus and the Apostles were fond of, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:7). The stone that was meant to be thrown away lest it cause damage to the building, has now become the foundation of the real building, of the church. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ being the only sure foundation on which everything else is built, for our own lives and for the whole world.

Jesus’ resurrection lasts forever, for his victory over death can never be reversed, and yet the resurrected Lord Jesus only remained on earth for forty days. The Gospels recount Jesus’ resurrected body being real and continuous with his body before the resurrection – he eats and digests food, he still has his wound marks as St. Thomas discovers – but it is also transformed. He appears in unlocked rooms and He disappears in plain sight. In 1 Corinthians 15, St Paul says that when we too are raised to life through death, we will have “spiritual bodies”, and Jesus’ resurrected body seems to be a template for this new life – real and tangible, but also spiritual and eternal.

The Ascension

Jesus’ ascension to heaven is not described in the Gospels of Matthew and John, and perhaps not Mark either, depending on whether the final verses of Mark’s Gospel are considered genuine. But all of the four Gospels are written in the light of the proclamation of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, which is described most fully at the start of the book of Acts, the book which then tells the story of the years after Jesus’ ascension. For the ascension is not simply a little add-on to Jesus’ life. If his life were a movie, the ascension is not something to occur during the final credits, as a kind of “by the way, this also

happened". Rather, Christ ascends to take up the rule of the very kingdom that he had proclaimed. Being lifted up, Christ is now seated at the right hand of the Father. In the creed most verbs we use of Jesus happened in the past – he “*was* conceived... born... suffered... died... was buried... ascended.” One verb is in the future – “he will come again”. And then there is one verb in the present. “And sits at the right hand of the Father.” That’s what Jesus is doing now, sitting, ruling the world, even as we await his return in glory.

The very fact of the ascension raises the question of “what next?” After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, what is to follow? What are the Christians to do? How is the building to be built of which he is the cornerstone? While it is good that one man died for the people, now that that one man is seated at the right hand of the Father, what is to become of the people, the church?

Sometimes Christians can think that it’s up to us to shape the nature of the church, but in reality Jesus did not leave this up to his followers to decide. Rather, he graciously provided for the church, for us, in concrete ways, which I want to describe under two headings: first worship, and second, the apostles, although the two are intimately connected.

The Resurrected Jesus on Worship

First, worship. In the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus seems to be especially concerned with worship, with the way in which he will be present with his people even as he is also sitting at the right hand of the Father.

On the very day of his resurrection, the first Easter Sunday, Jesus spends the afternoon and early evening accompanying two of his disciples on a walk from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, as recounted in Luke’s Gospel (chapter 24). They don’t recognise him until the very end, but what he does is first show them where he himself, Christ Jesus, is spoken of in the Old Testament, giving them a kind of sermon as they walked along. Then, as they gather in a home in the evening, Jesus breaks bread, just as he did at the Last Supper. And it’s at that moment that his two disciples recognize him, but also that’s the moment when Jesus disappears. It’s as if Jesus is showing that even if you do not recognize Jesus with your eyes in worship, he is nevertheless still there. And how is Jesus’ with us? In two very concrete ways. First, he is with us when we proclaim the Scriptures in a way that reveals and points to Christ Jesus, just as we do every Sunday in our readings and preaching. And then, second, he is with us in the breaking of the bread, in the holy communion which we celebrate every Sunday.

That’s what the Gospel of Luke recounts Jesus doing on the first Easter Sunday. In John’s Gospel, however, John also recounts Jesus doing one more thing. Perhaps as soon as Jesus had disappeared from the sight of the two disciples in Emmaus, John tells us that the resurrected Jesus appeared to other disciples who were gathered in a locked room. Jesus shows them his wounds, and then says: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:23). How is Jesus then with his church going forward? Through the forgiveness of sins, enacted in his name in our worship, in our divine service, as well as in private confession and absolution. Biblical, Christ-centred preaching and holy communion in Luke’s Gospel, the

forgiveness of sins in John's Gospel, and then there is one more key word that relates to worship and Jesus' ongoing presence with his church in Matthew's Gospel.

Rather than occurring on Easter Sunday, the resurrected Lord Jesus speaks most in Matthew's Gospel on the day of his ascension. We hear that Jesus leads his eleven disciples up on a mountain and then says the following, which are the words that conclude Matthew's Gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

By now you will have gotten the picture – that the risen Lord Jesus is especially concerned with reassuring his followers that he will be with them, in certain concrete ways that he provides. And here in Matthew, to the list of Christ-centred preaching, holy communion and the forgiveness of sins, we can now also add the gift of baptism, and the teaching of Jesus' commands, all done with Jesus' own authority.

To the question of "What next?" after Jesus' ascension, the risen Lord Jesus provides a rich response of worship – a worship which is not to be founded on our expression of our feelings, but on the concrete ways in which Jesus Christ the cornerstone will continue to be with his people, and his people with him.

We heard tonight a reading from the book of Acts, which describes the early years of the apostolic church. It was written by St. Luke and is something of a sequel to his Gospel. We heard the very first words of Acts, in which Luke says that in the Gospel, his first book, he had written about "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). The implication Luke is making is that even after the ascension of Christ Jesus, Jesus is continuing to act and teach. The Gospel was just the beginning of Jesus' ministry which extends through Acts, even unto our own day. So when we look through Acts, and through other books of the New Testament, we can see that the early Church engaged in the very worship practices that the risen Lord Jesus had given his church.

St. Peter, for instance, proclaims on the day of Pentecost the Old Testament, showing how it points to Jesus Christ (Acts 2), just as Jesus did on the road to Emmaus. We also hear that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), again, just as the risen Lord had broken bread at Emmaus. When the Ethiopian eunuch asks St. Philip about the Scriptures, Philip teaches him about baptism, and then baptizes him, just as Jesus had instructed before he ascended (Acts 8). When St. Paul speaks about the whole purpose of his calling, he says it is that the nations "may receive the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18), just as Jesus had commanded. Finally, when it comes to teaching the nations everything that Jesus had commanded, we can in some ways see the whole of the New Testament as the way in which the apostles fulfil this – speaking and putting into writing divine commands and exhortations, which we will especially be looking at next month. Jesus' ministry continues, then, through the worship practices he gives to the church.

'We believe in the... Apostolic Church'

And so there is another, complementary way of responding to the question of “what next?” after Jesus’ ascension. And that is the twelve apostles, or what we confess in the creed as the apostolic church. The apostles are, as we have seen, themselves intimately connected with worship. It is to the apostles that the risen Lord Jesus gives the gifts of baptism, the forgiveness of sins, holy communion, and the proclamation of the Word of God. He doesn’t give these gifts as private possessions, but rather as means through which the apostles are to serve the church. So in worship Jesus gives the church practices, and in the apostles Jesus gives the church people to oversee these practices, and the people of God as a whole.

In John’s Gospel, just after Jesus has given the apostles the forgiveness of sins, Jesus speaks to Peter, in the light of Peter’s denial of Christ as Peter was warming himself by the fire. Now, three times the resurrected Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and three times Peter says he does. But three times also Jesus tells Peter: “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15-19). The gifts of worship are given to the apostles so that they can feed and tend the flock that belongs to Jesus. Pastors in turn receive these apostolic gifts today, and the word ‘pastor’ means a shepherd, reflecting these words of Jesus that worship is a gift for the apostles and then pastors to feed and tend the whole flock of God with.

So even while worship and the apostles are intimately connected, we can say some other things about the nature of the apostles and the apostolic church which we confess.

You may remember from last month that the twelve apostles were called directly by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus had a number of followers, but the apostles were men called for a specific purpose. Let’s hear again, for example, what is written in Mark’s Gospel, which we heard in tonight’s reading:

And he [Jesus] went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. (Mark 3:13-15)

From the beginning, then, the apostles were appointed directly by Jesus to be with him, and so also then be able to bear witness to the risen Lord Jesus. They are given Jesus’ authority, already here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, but also right up until the end, as we heard in Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus bestows on his apostles his authority. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...”

An apostle then, was one sent by God with Jesus’ own authority, and with the task of bearing witness to the risen Lord Jesus. So when at the beginning of Acts, the apostles seek to replace Judas, they seek a man who has witnessed the risen Lord Jesus. When St Paul, who is an apostle added later, wants to strengthen his claim to be an apostle, he says that on the road to Damascus he too saw the risen Lord Jesus. Even though St. Paul had been a persecutor of Christians, and not one of Jesus’ followers prior to his ascension, he does stake his claim to be an apostle on the fact that he saw the risen Lord Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus. Seeing the risen Lord Jesus is a part of what makes an apostle.

I mentioned also that in Acts they look for a man. The apostles Jesus chooses are all men, and the church's historic teaching and practice of ordaining proven men as pastors has its basis in this reality, something which St Paul's teaching complements in a couple of places (1 Timothy 2:11-14; 1 Corinthians 14:33-38). God created humanity as male and female and this is very good. It's not a bug but a feature. The apostles as men sit within this good, and gendered order. But their maleness also gives a good opportunity to say what the apostles are not. They are not necessarily better Christians, not necessarily more faithful, not necessarily more beloved by Jesus Christ. At the foot of the cross, we only hear of one disciple, St. John, but we hear of a number of women. The other apostles had fled. So too at the tomb of Christ, there are women in attendance but not, initially, the apostles. The apostles are given a unique authority, but it is not of any higher rung in the kingdom of God, and no guarantee of faithfulness.

While we're on it, there are some books of the New Testament that are especially concerned with being a pastor. They are the first and second letters of Paul to Timothy, and the letter of Paul to Titus, and they're sometimes referred to as the pastoral letters or epistles. The letter of Philemon, which Pastor Fraser proclaimed this morning, is sometimes added to this list, too. These books are written from Paul to other pastors, encouraging them but also laying down a pattern for how pastors are to conduct themselves, and what are the qualifications necessary for being a pastor. One of the main concerns of these pastoral epistles is also with false teaching, and the need to guard the good teaching of God that has been handed on (e.g. 2 Timothy 1). Throughout the New Testament we can see a constant concern for teaching what is true and godly, and the danger of teaching what is false. It's the same spirit that Jesus showed in his own ministry of distinguishing true teaching about the kingdom of God from the ways of the world. 'We must obey God rather than men/human beings' is the theme for tonight's sermon, and it comes from the lips of Peter and all the apostles (Acts 5:29). And so the apostolic concern with right teaching, is animated by Christ's own declaration that it is the truth which sets free, and the proclamation that Jesus Christ himself is the way, the truth, and the life.

Or, to put it another way, listen to these words of Jesus that he speaks concerning how the apostles are to minister after Jesus' ascension:

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-28)

Jesus says here that there will be two witness to Him: the Holy Spirit of truth and also the Apostles. They don't work separately but work together to bear witness to the risen Lord Jesus. How do we know that Jesus is risen from the dead? Because of the Apostles. They saw him and have told us the truth through their writings in the New Testament. That's also why Jesus can see he is building his church on the stone of Peter, the head of the apostles, and his confession of faith. It's also why in Ephesians Paul can say that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone (2:19-20).

As I've already mentioned, the content of this apostolic teaching will be in our sights next month. But it's been good for us to dwell a while on the importance of the apostles, as well as worship, for the way in which Christ Jesus continues to minister to his church. While the

church is, in a very important sense, focussed on Christ alone, it also depends on the testimony of the apostles. The unity of the church today depends on the word of the apostles (see John 17:20-21) – not necessarily on what we think, but on the word of truth, given to the apostles. In this way we are an apostolic church. While there are no more apostles after St. Paul – no one who has witnessed the risen Lord Jesus and been authorised by him – we are built on their foundation, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone.

The spread of the early church

It's for the remaining minutes of this sermon to look very briefly now at the spread of the early church, recounted in the New Testament. At the beginning of Acts, just before his ascension, Jesus declares to the apostles:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.
(Acts 1:8)

The rest of the book of Acts is framed by this commission, as indeed the apostles spread over the globe bearing witness to the risen Lord Jesus. But it's instructive that they first only leave Jerusalem after they are persecuted. Jesus had commissioned them to spread, but it is only after arrests and the first martyrdom of Stephen that they flee Jerusalem. This is instructive because wherever the Gospel goes it does not always bring earthly peace, just as Jesus often warned. Tradition has it that all of the apostles died deaths of martyrdom with the exception of St John, although he was nevertheless exiled too.

While Acts bears witness to the work of all the apostles, it really focusses especially on two apostles, Peter and Paul. They were both bold personalities, and in the book of Galatians we even hear about their disagreements – Paul says that he “opposed Peter to his face” (Galatians 2:11). But they nevertheless worked in fellowship with each other (Galatians 2:9), and Acts is full of their stories, with Peter dominating the first section, and Paul the rest. In particular, we hear there of Paul's three missionary journeys, with scholars speculating from other New Testament letters that Paul also perhaps had other journeys Acts doesn't relate. On these journeys, Paul, who earned his living as a tent maker, travelled throughout Asia and Europe, proclaiming Jesus Christ, helping to establish churches and appoint pastors, and, regularly, being persecuted. At the end of Acts Paul is arrested and taken to Rome where tradition tells us he was martyred, the same city in which Peter was said to have been martyred.

But these deaths were not failures. Rather, bearing witness to Christ then and now means also suffering, but doing so with a sure hope that Christ has never abandoned the church, but rather he is even now ruling, and his kingdom is coming, and his will is being done, as we pray in the Lord's prayer.

Exhortation

My own calling as a pastor is as Lecturer in Church History at Australian Lutheran College. And one of the units I teach is on Australian Lutheran history. I called the unit 'To the ends of the earth', which is a quote from Jesus' words to the apostles at the start of Acts. It took some 1800 years for the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ, that he died for sinners, and

now rules at the right hand of the Father, to reach the shores of Australia. And it is striking to hear how Aboriginal people were brought into the church in the nineteenth century, and how in many places are keeping the faith of Jesus Christ in a way that those of longer Christian ancestry are no longer doing. And this is a testament also to the apostolic church – that through worship and the testimony of the apostles, Jesus is still acting, still teaching, calling all people to his church.

Our confidence tonight and always is that Jesus Christ will never stop this, at that the Word of the Lord, given to the apostles and now to us, will endure forever.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Next Month...

2 October: 'And the greatest of these is love': The Apostolic Teaching

Biblical books: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude

Texts for the Divine Service:

Joel 2:23-32 / Psalm 16 / 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 / Matthew 28:16-20

Recommended Pre-Reading:

- Romans 3 – Righteousness through faith
- Romans 5 – Peace with God through faith
- 1 Corinthians 2 – Christ crucified
- 1 Corinthians 7 – Principles for marriage etc.
- 1 Corinthians 15 – The resurrection of Christ and the dead
- 2 Corinthians 4-5 – Jars of clay; our heavenly dwelling
- Ephesians 2 – By grace through faith
- Philippians 2 – Christ's humility
- Colossians 3 – The new self
- 1 Thessalonians 4-5 – The day of the Lord
- 2 Thessalonians 2 – The man of lawlessness
- Hebrews 9-10 – The holy place and Christ's sacrifice
- James 1 – Testing of your faith
- 1 Peter 2 – A living stone and a holy people
- 2 Peter 2 – False prophets and teachers
- 1 John 4 – Test the spirits; God is love
- 2 John – Truth and love
- 3 John – Support and opposition
- Jude - Perseverance

Recommended on YouTube:

- Search for 'The Bible Project Romans, and likewise for the other books