

Background to the reading

The writer of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles tells us in each work about the ascension of Jesus. There are differences. In the Acts of the Apostles he says that Jesus' ascension took place in the Mount of Olives while Luke says it happened in the vicinity of Bethany, which also was in the Mount of Olives. Bethany was a village, about 3 km from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho. It is first mentioned in the Gospels, especially as the home of Jesus' beloved friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

This writer was a skilful writer who I am sure did not want to repeat the events. However, it was equally important to reconfirm in his second work that Jesus ascended to heaven. Another sign of his skilfulness in writing is that both the end and the beginning of his Gospel account takes place Jerusalem.

In Greek stories, various heroes ascended to heaven, usually by dying and becoming gods. For Luke, however, the ascension is only a confirmation of Jesus' status at the resurrection, a coronation of the king who was both human and divine all along. Jewish accounts of Elijah in the Old Testament taken up to heaven show that Jewish readers would understand the ascension.

The resurrection appearance that began in Luke 24:36 continues but with a change in scene. Leaving Jerusalem, Jesus leads the disciples to Bethany on the Mount of Olives. After bestowing upon them his parting blessing, he is taken up into heaven. Having worshiped Jesus, the disciples return with great joy to Jerusalem. There, while waiting for the promised Spirit, they are continually in the temple blessing God.

Luke has carefully prepared his readers for Jesus' ascension. At the transfiguration Moses and Elijah spoke of Jesus' future "departure/exodus" (9:31). Jesus' trip to Jerusalem had as its goal his being "taken up" (9:51). At his trial Jesus refers to his being seated soon at God's right hand (22:69), and his death is seen as necessary for his entering into his glory (24:26). With Jesus' ascension, Luke concludes his Gospel, and at this place he will begin his second work namely "Acts of the Apostles".

The message of the writer is clear: Everything that was said and written about Jesus became true. He was fully human and fully God.

MP 54

Bind us together

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is:

52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

As you all know Nanda and I recently received British citizenship and have also applied for our new British passports. I do not think that people always appreciate a simple daily item such as a passport. But a passport is a very important document. It literally opens doors or “airport gates” into different countries. Without a passport you cannot travel or enter any other foreign country. A passport says that you belong to a certain country and that the Government of that country will protect, help and support any traveller carrying that passport. If a country cannot commit to this rule, foreign countries will impose visitors to obtain visas, which is often accompanied by many restrictions.

Why am I saying all this?

Well, when Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave all that has faith passports to heaven. Our photos are attached, and we belong to God. We are citizens of God’s Kingdom which means that we can go through life knowing that He will look after us. His care and love will be all around us. And there are no restrictions as to how many people we can speak to about our faith, His love and mercy. And there are no limitations on our joy, and actions of loving forgiveness. There are also no limitations on our travels. In fact the Lord commanded: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The only thing is however that we will be carrying an “invisible passport” meaning that the only way we can show that we belong to the heavenly kingdom is through our joy, our gratitude and our acts of love. And this joy and love cannot be faked, or bought. People should be able to see it wherever we are and wherever we go.

I read an amazing story on the internet. A young salesman was disappointed about losing a big sale, and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented, "I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." The manager replied, "Son, take my advice: your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty." Our lives should be so filled with the joy that we belong to Jesus Christ that we create a thirst for the Gospel's joy and hope and love.

As citizens of the Kingdom of God we are facing another BIG opportunity on the 14th of June on the Galaday - where we can show through our joy and actions of love, that we belong to God. We have the perfect chance to convince everyone around us that we do not need alcohol, or drugs to have a ball on Galaday. We do not need Bibles under our arms or logos on our T shirts to show everyone around us that we belong to our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ. All we need to do is to serve, have joy in our hearts and love unconditionally.

There are so many opportunities where the people around us can see and feel the joy of belonging to God through our lives of faith.

And with joy I do not mean a swallow laughing giggly sort of feeling or emotion. The Greek word in our text is "gara" "[xara]" which can mean "happiness" "being content" and overcome with joy that comes within yourself. It is always accompanied by deeds like our reading suggests. A swallow sort of joy is always short lived and egoistic. The joy of belonging to Jesus Christ is a joy that surpasses all human understanding and is always accompanied by deeds and actions. The disciples showed their joy by faithfully serving God in his temple.

To have joy does not mean that we will not suffer and never cry. We will suffer like sheep on the way to the slaughterhouse but our joy of belonging to God will give us strength and comfort to face whatever may come.

May you and I never miss one opportunity where we praise and thank God for making us citizens of heaven. May we never take for granted that we have received the passports to heaven. May we show it to everyone around us through joy and thanksgiving, giving God all the glory.

Amen