

Where is Jesus Now and What is He up to? A Sermon

1 Kings 17: 8-16

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44



When I was a child I already showed signs that I was going to be a theologian when I grew up. I used to wonder about things like this: If Jesus is everywhere, then is Jesus sitting in this chair? If I sit down in the chair, will I sit on Jesus? If Jesus is in my heart, how did he get small enough to fit there? If Jesus is in other people's hearts too, does that mean that there are lots of little Jesus's, with each person having their own Jesus living in their heart?

Of course, such speculation is nothing new. The Medieval theologian William of Ockham (not one of my favorites by the way) once speculated that in God's absolute power God could make it possible for the eye of Christ in one part of the eucharistic host to see another part of the body of Christ in another part of the host. And, of course, those who have taken my Anglican way of theology class or other courses at Trinity in church history or sacramental theology should know that a central cause of disagreement at the time of the Reformation had to do with the problem of how we relate the risen body of

Christ to the consecrated elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist, with the Lutherans insisting that because Christ's body is everywhere, there is no problem with him also being present in the bread and wine, while the Reformed insisted that, since Christ's body is at the right hand of God the Father, he cannot be physically present in the bread and wine, so he must be spiritually present—whatever that means.

As I read the epistle for this morning, I could not help but be reminded of my old childhood questions, and of all these controversies in church history. There is a sense in which the writer of Hebrews is addressing the central issue that lay behind my childhood questions, and behind the Reformation controversies about Eucharistic theology. He situates the issue by laying out a timeline with a beginning point and an end point. The beginning point is the earthly mission of Jesus, in which through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection Jesus has, says the author, "appeared once for all, at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." The end point will be Jesus' return: "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly awaiting him." (Heb. 9:28). If the beginning point of the timeline is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in which he put away sin, and the end point is his returning to bring salvation to those whose sins he has put away, the question that comes to mind is: "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews answers the question this way: "For Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf." (Heb. 9:24.)

Theology uses technical language to talk about these things. There is an entire theological topic called the doctrine of the Ascension or the Session of the Risen Christ. But really, the doctrine of the Ascension is just a shorthand way to ask

the question: "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" For those of us who live here and now, between the time of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to put away sin, and before his return to bring us final salvation, what does it mean that Jesus "has now entered . . . into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf"?

I am going to suggest three answers to this question. First, the Ascension means that Jesus has been exalted as Lord. The very earliest writings of the New Testament are full of this exaltation language. One of the earliest hymns of the church was incorporated in Paul's letter to the Philippians and affirms that "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). Other passages tell us that Jesus intercedes for us "at the right hand of God" (Rom. 8:34), that Jesus Christ "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him" (1. Pet. 3:22). In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that God has "raised [Christ] from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet." (Eph. 1:20-22). As we see in this morning's reading, The Epistle to the Hebrews uses the language of worship and sacrifice to say that Jesus is now our high priest. Elsewhere the same writer says: "We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven . . ." (Heb. 8:1).

That Jesus is ascended "to the right hand of the Father" and that he "intercedes for us" before the Father means two things. First, it means that Jesus is the Lord of history, and that we can trust him to make things turn out right. As the old spiritual says: "He's got the whole world in his hands."

Second, it means that God is for us, that Jesus has taken our humanity unto himself in the incarnation, and in the resurrection and ascension he has in some sense taken us with himself to heaven. As Paul writes in Ephesians: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loves us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus . . ." (Eph. 2: 4-6). Or, again, as we read in this morning's passage, the risen Christ "appears in the presence of God on our behalf." (Heb. 9:24).

This answer to the question, "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" is, of course, paradoxical. The Lordship of Jesus over all creation does not appear to be obvious. The world goes on much as it did before Jesus came. The wealthy are still wealthy, the poor still poor. The powerful still crush the powerless and grind their faces in the dirt. The violent still bring death and misery to innocents and small children. As we recognize in our own community, illness and death still reign. We are all too aware that followers of Jesus face persecution and death in many parts of the world. And, try as we might, we ourselves too often find that we still fall back into our old sinful ways. So, the first paradox we discover as we answer the question "Where is Jesus now, and what he is up to?" is that Jesus' Lordship is a hidden Lordship. The exalted Jesus may be Lord but we can experience this Lordship only by faith. Jesus' Lordship is a hidden Lordship in which we must often experience Christ's triumph as his apparent absence from our world and our lives. Just as John's gospel says that Jesus was "glorified" when he was "lifted up" (Jn. 13:31-32, Jn. 17:1-5) on the cross of his crucifixion, so we often experience Jesus' Lordship paradoxically in the midst of the world's suffering. To experience Jesus' Lordship is to take up his cross.

And yet, we do experience his Lordship. There are moments

when, although someone has done us wrong, we suddenly find ourselves able to forgive, or, even more, those moments of grace when someone forgives us for something really reprehensible. Friends, and spouses, and, sometimes total strangers offer us moments of unexpected kindness and generosity. In those moments, we realize, Jesus really is Lord.

There is a second paradox connected with the answer to the question, "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" Although Jesus' resurrection and ascension means that Jesus is now absent from our midst—he has gone to be with the Father—nonetheless, in a very real sense, he is still present with us. Before he went to his Father, he promised to be with us. As the risen Jesus says in Matthew's gospel: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20). It is important that we not forget, in our frustration with the ways in which Christ's Lordship is often hidden, that he is nonetheless present with us.

But how is Jesus present? How could he be present? Has he not ascended "to the right hand of the Father?" We are immediately tempted to blurt out: "Through the Holy Spirit!" But, for the moment, let us stay with the Ascension. The Ascension is about the Ascension of a body. And if Jesus is to be truly present with us, he must be present with us as he was on earth, as a body. The New Testament does talk about the Holy Spirit as the One who comes after Jesus, but it always talks about the Spirit as the One who makes the risen Christ present to us, and it inevitably does so in terms of his body.

Jesus' body is not physically present to us, of course. We cannot see it or touch it. But the presence of Christ that the New Testament associates with his body after his ascension is what theologians call a "sacramental presence." Jesus becomes present to us, first, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the elements of which he said: "This is my body. This is my blood." It is through participating in worship that we

experience his presence as the Holy Spirit descends on the elements of Bread and Wine and, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, sanctifies them "to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him."

Of course, Anglicans have never claimed to be able to explain how this happens—how bread and wine can become for us the presence of the risen Jesus. And there have been those who have held back from what they consider to be crass materialism. Surely the bread and wine are just symbols of Christ's presence. Well, perhaps, they are. But the God of the Bible is not a Platonist. He is not afraid of matter. God created the world. He came among us as an embodied human being. That the risen Christ would also choose to be present to us in Bread and Wine is no more and no less unbelievable than that he would ascend into heaven in a risen body.

The second way in which the New Testament speaks of the risen and ascended Christ's presence in terms of his body is in the form of his Church. It is here where the New Testament claims we find Christ's Lordship worked out. Paul says in Ephesians, "[God] has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:22-23). As we partake of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, we become for one another his presence among us. As the apostle Paul says in another scripture passage: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Or again, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer: "Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and one spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ, to the praise of your name."

Once more, that the risen Christ is present among us as the

Church becomes his Body in this sacramental way is paradoxical. It is not immediately evident to me that bread and wine are his body and blood. Sometimes, it is even less evident to me that my fellow Christians are the presence of Christ to me. It is again, only by faith, and perhaps a vivid imagination that I can embrace this scandal. And, yet, again, there are those moments when Christ makes himself known to me through a brother or sister in Christ, and the paradox is one of unexpected grace.

Finally, there is a third paradox in the answer to the question "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" The "mystery of faith" is that "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Christ will come again. The writer to the Hebrews writes in this morning's passage: "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Heb. 9:28). In the first chapter of the Book of Acts, the angel tells the apostles, after they see Jesus disappearing, apparently into outer space: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) Advent will begin in a few short weeks, so I will not dwell on this notion of Jesus' return. There will be plenty of time for that in the weeks ahead. The paradox again is that we believe he will come, but we must wait in hope. We cannot hurry him. We cannot predict when he will come. There are those who forget this from time to time. Every once in awhile there are those who mark a particular day on the calendar as "the Day." And they have been invariably disappointed. But this kind of speculation is forbidden us. How do we know he will come? We know because he has risen. We dare not say when.

These then are the answers to our question: "Where is Jesus now, and what is he up to?" So, first, the ascended Christ is Lord, but his Lordship is hidden. The ascended Christ is present, but his presence is sacramental. The ascended Christ

will come again, but we await his coming in hope. In the meantime, we wait “between the times” of his time on earth and his return as Judge and Savior. It is tempting to live without these paradoxes—to say that Jesus is Lord, “but only in our hearts,” or that he is not Lord at all because the world is going to hell, and the economy is in terrible shape. It is tempting to demand that Christ be present in my time and in my way to support my cause, or to give up on a world that Christ has abandoned. It is tempting to pick the day or the hour when we know that he will return, or to simply live our own lives as if he’s never coming back. All of these temptations are easier than living in the tension of having a Lord who often does not seem to be Lord, a Lord who is present in the Church—of all places, where people often ignore you or hurt your feelings or wear your patience thin or even take you to court, a Lord whose second coming often seems more like pie in the sky than a new heaven and a new earth.

But if we count the Ascended Jesus as our Lord, we must live with these tensions. To do so, we can look for the hints that he really is risen. Once in a while we can see his Lordship when something turns out right, or even sometimes more when it doesn’t. If we keep eating the bread and drinking the wine, we may finally learn to experience him in one another. And our hope that he will return can be nudged along when he comes to us in unexpected ways. Perhaps he was there in that sacker who loaded your groceries yesterday. Perhaps he was there in that fellow student who was there for you when no one else was. Perhaps you were the presence of Jesus for a stranger or friend when you weren’t even aware of it.

Let us live in faith, confident in his Lordship, recognizing his love as we discover his presence in one another, awaiting in hope his salvation—when he will make all things new.

(Not all sermons have to be original. Having had an especially busy week the week before last, I largely reworked a sermon I had given over a decade before when I had to preach

in chapel last Wednesday. I was surprised to find this sermon received more enthusiastic comments than any I had preached so far at Trinity. God sometimes knows what he is up to when we don't.)