

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **ASCENSION**

**12<sup>th</sup> May 2013**

Daniel 7:9-14  
Luke 24:44-53

There is an American Sitcom popular with the younger generation, called "the Big Bang Theory". In it one of the characters, who is completely compulsive in his behaviours, has what he calls "my spot" in any room, at any table. It is the place where he feels comfortable and woe betide anyone who unthinkingly takes his place. "You're in my spot," he says, frequently.

Most of us are not so territorial as that, but we do have places which we think of as our spot or our space. Most families, when they gather around the table always sit in the same order. Many couples have their own usual chairs by the fireside in the living room. We have our preferred side of the bed, no matter where we may be. We have "our" seats in church, though I hope we would never ask someone else to move from them. There are places which make us feel more comfortable, and these places we think of, in a way, as "my space". There is even a social networking site known as My Space, a bit like Facebook, where people can communicate to others about their lives, and likes and dislikes, and what makes them unique. They can show what makes a space, real or virtual, my space.

I wrote most of this sermon on a train (again), and while I was doing so someone came up the people in the seat behind me and said "I'm sorry, but you're in my seat." My seat, my spot, my place, my space - the small areas of life over which we like to think we have control.

Today we read of the ascension. Thursday was actually Ascension day, forty days after Easter, but we read Luke's account (or one of them, for he gave another account in Acts) of Jesus' ascension. The ascension is what we often refer to as Jesus going up to heaven. Today, in the children's talk I tried very hard to avoid that phrase, "Going up to heaven". Because that wasn't what was going on. Not really.

What was going on in the ascension was that Jesus, who was one of us, human, at home on earth, which is our space, was also going to be at home in heaven, which is God's space. He was going to be enthroned in God's space, and because of that he was also enthroned in our space.

Let's unpack this, because I think that the ascension so one of the least well understood happenings of Jesus' much misunderstood life.

In the first century in Judaism, the word "heaven" didn't mean what we, influenced by medieval theologians, who were in turn influenced by Greek philosophers as well as by Scripture, think it meant. Heaven was not a place beyond the sky where God lives and where we go where we die.

No heaven meant God' space, God's reality, God's sphere of influence and activity. It was, is, where God is most at home, but it is not up there. Heaven was not a place you went up to, except that to be in God's space was of course a tremendous privilege, and therefore a promotion.

Heaven was where God is king, supreme, in charge, with dominion.

Earth was seen, since the fall, to be our space, or maybe the evil one's space. Either way it was not God's space, which was what it had been created to be. That was what the fall was about. The fall was when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and set in train serial disobedience by the whole human race, and whether you think the story literally true or not, it is obviously a story which explains how the world, which God called good, got away from the design of its creator and so ceased to be his space, his dominion.

And then Jesus came. He came and preached that the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven - the phrases are interchangeable, and both mean God's space - the kingdom, God's space, had come. Not that it was coming one day, but that it had arrived, on earth. Earth was once again to be God's space, his dominion. This meant, of course, that it needed to be renewed, remade even, because the fallen world no longer reflected God, it's maker. But that was what Jesus came to do.

Kingdom of God, Kingdom of heaven, this was one phrase Jesus used a lot, the main theme of his teaching and living. The other significant phrase, in our understanding of his life and of his ascension, is "Son of Man." In using that phrase Jesus was deliberately echoing the passage we read today from the book of Daniel, and other passages which follow from it.

For most of us, our knowledge of the book of Daniel is the story of Daniel and the lions. Some others of us know about his three friends being thrown into the fiery furnace. We may know about the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. But few of us nowadays know much about the second half of the book. The second half of the book of Daniel is a series of apocalyptic prophecies and visions. It was written later than the first half, maybe as late as shortly before Jesus' lifetime, since it is written in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, not Hebrew. I said the writing is Apocalyptic, meaning to do with things ending and changing, and in this case it is mainly to do with the end of empire, the downfall of Rome.

That being the theme of these chapters, you can imagine that they were very popular, very well-known in first century Palestine. And in them is this figure of the Son of Man. When Jesus used the phrase, these prophecies are what would have come to mind. So what do we learn about the Son of Man? Because who he is and what he is tells us about who and what Jesus is.

In Daniel chapter seven we meet four horrific beasts, which stand for four human empires, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman. These were the empires which had dominated the Middle East for centuries until Jesus' day. Each beast, or empire succeeded the last, until we are left with the fourth beast, which has ten horns, usually thought to stand for emperors. Amongst these another horn, a small one, grows, which speaks arrogantly and insolently. It was at this point we came in today, and we came in on a court scene. Thrones, plural, are set up and the Ancient of Days, representing God himself is seen to take his place. The fourth beast - the Roman Empire, remember, and its arrogant horn, is put to death, and the other empires are robbed of their power and dominion. And then, then, we see the one like a Son of Man coming in glory, being presented to God and being given "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." And that is what

people had in mind when Jesus called himself the Son of Man, and that is why it was so completely devastating when the power of the Roman Empire seemed to vanquish him, by having him crucified and killed. Surely all his talk about God's space taking over must have been wrong? Surely his naming himself the Son of Man must have been an error? None of it seemed to be working out as the prophecies he invoked had promised it would.

In Luke's gospel Jesus appears to the disciples, and, just as he already has to the two on the road to Emmaus, he has to explain the scriptures to them. He has to explain, because it seems to the disciples that scripture has not been fulfilled. And what Jesus needs most of all to show is that the breaking in of God's kingdom, which is a real kingdom, real power and dominion on earth as much as in his traditional space known as heaven, is in accord with scripture. It is in accord, and so is the way it has happened: by his suffering and death and resurrection.

God's space, God's dominion is not brought about by the methods of the fallen world that he has come to renew. It is not brought about by violence, except by having violence done to him. It is not brought about by force, except force being used against him. It is not brought about by human means, except human means which end up doing the opposite of what they intend. That was how it was brought about in Jesus' life and teaching and experience, and how it still makes inroads in the world: by sacrifice and suffering, which transforms and is transformed, even as Jesus did and was.

Which brings us back to the ascension. Jesus met with his friends, explained things to them, so that they could understand that while they were working and witnessing for the transformation of the world into God's space (not just waiting to go to heaven when they died), it would mean doing it in the same way that Jesus did. He explained this and then he withdrew from them and was taken to heaven, to God's space. It was only a week later, when at Pentecost they are given God's Spirit, that the disciples were to discover that by withdrawing from them to God's space, Jesus had linked God's space and our space more firmly than ever before.

Or maybe they had learned that even before they're given the gift of God's Spirit. Maybe they had learned that right away. Luke tells us that they spent their time in the temple worshipping and praying. Worshipping and praying. being in God's presence. Being in God's space. When we pray, especially when we pray together, we are in God's space, God's kingdom, as nowhere else.

When the Spirit was given they were to discover, what Christians ever since have known, that with God's spirit within us, everywhere we go is God's space, the place where through us God's influence is known, is in charge. Jesus ascended to heaven, was promoted to be in God's space, so that he could unite heaven and earth, an earth which is being remade by the sacrificial lives of his followers, who, like him, bring in God's space and live knowing that full authority has been given to our Lord and through him to us. Not only in heaven, but also on earth.

Jesus ascended. He was enthroned in glory as the one like a Son of Man in the presence of God and so it was, and is that through him God's space is no longer just in heaven, but also on earth. So it is that the earth is renewed. So it is that we, wherever we go in this world take God's space with us and by lives of sacrificial love spread it. Jesus went back up to heaven and the story of his life was complete? Far from it. Jesus ascended to God's right hand and the story of his life and the purpose of his living, and the effects of his ministry and his being simply expanded and have gone on expanding for ever.