

Where is Jesus?

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Much ink has been spilled on who Jesus was and is, but less I think on where he is. The Apostles' Creed, our earliest one written, states that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. The focus of this creed is not on his life, his miracles and his teachings, but his cosmic work (sent, born, dead, resurrected, ascended, and busy). If he is sitting at the right hand of the father, how can he be with us? The stimulus for this sermon comes from the Thursday Bible study group who have been listening to Prof. N. T. Wright's video course on Surprised by Hope. The surprise is that our eventual destination is not heaven but a new earth ruling with Jesus. One of the topics covers his Ascension where Jesus goes to heaven to prepare the earth for his return to be with his church. It is a temporary location for Jesus and us.

Many years ago in rural Ireland, Seamus the son of a poor farming family, was four years of age when he was sent by his father for his first day at school to the nearby convent. To him, this was a massive building with a very large imposing door. He knocks at this door and eventually he hears footsteps, and

to him an enormous woman in black comes out. “What do you want?” “Please, I have come to school, my parents sent me.” “Do you know Jesus? I can’t let you in if you don’t know and love Jesus?” This was not the question he expected; he thought it would be about adding and subtracting. He is desperately trying to come up with an answer. He looks past the door and stares down the hall to see a naked figure hanging on the wall with outstretched arms and blood everywhere. “Is that him there?” pointing to the cross. “Yes and no, came the answer, “because that is to remind us he is everywhere.” Seamus looked around up and down. “Where is he? I can’t see him.” “That doesn’t mean because you can’t see him he’s not here.” Seamus gulped, “It doesn’t? Oh, if I can’t see him, he must be in that cupboard there,” pointing at a shut door? “No, he’s not in the cupboard! Jesus doesn’t go into cupboards!” Seamus looked further down the hall to see a flight of stairs to the second floor.” “Well, then. Maybe he is under those stairs?” “He’s not under the stairs! But he is here, with us now. He’s upstairs. He’s downstairs. He’s outside. He’s inside. He’s everywhere.” Seamus thought that Jesus on the cross is a big man, why can’t I see him? What should he do now? Then this female authority forcefully says, “Do you love him?” “I don’t know, I’ve never seen him.” “God loves you and he wants your love, but if you do not give him your love he will cast you into everlasting flame and you will burn in hell forever.” “What?” Seamus almost wet his pants and quickly ran home. That day Seamus decided never to enter a church or convent again as it was the most dangerous place ever to be; if you can’t see Jesus, it’s game over, roasting in hell forever. Later, Seamus went to funeral and found out a little about the Trinity but that is another story.

Miscommunication cost Seamus an opportunity to find out where Jesus is and what he does. No wonder that unbelievers scoff at the likelihood of an omnipresent Christ; it is impossible for us to grasp its meaning.

We adults don't ask questions like Seamus and children, who like clear-cut answers to hard questions, we accept Jesus is everywhere, but we don't go much further how that works. He is here right now in this sanctuary; he is in Okemos Community Church and 2:42 down the road. And all round the world. He is with all believing communities 24/7. If we ever colonize the Moon or Mars, I expect there will be little churches set up and the parishioners would expect Jesus to be there even though he is called the Savior of the World. This is a given for us brought up in the church, but it is a challenge if we think it through. Believing in an invisible Jesus was also a challenge to the early church. Peter, who had seen Jesus, comforts his flock by saying in 1 Peter 1:8-9: *"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you don't see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."*

As Jonathan Parnell, Pastor, Minneapolis, writes, there are illustrations of Jesus sitting in the pews of our churches, or in paintings of Jesus wearing jeans. But these images are wrong. It's wrong because we have turned Jesus into some disembodied human who is more like a bearded phantom than the enthroned God-Man. And that means, at least for the past 2,000 years, Jesus doesn't make footprints in the sand. Right now, Jesus really is away; Jesus said so himself in John 14:28 *"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to*

you’ “. He left the earth at the Ascension and will return in his resurrected body at some unspecified future time. So, if not here, where? Where is Jesus? The Bible tells us that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3). And his being there is good news. In fact, the Ascension of Jesus to the Father’s right hand is an indispensable aspect of the gospel. Which means, we aren’t saved and comforted unless Jesus is not here. So, what does he do at the right hand of God in heaven?

Ruler at God’ right hand

Ephesians 1:20-23 tells us that Jesus rules at the right hand of God “..he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²²And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but it is for the church that he rules.

D. A. Carson, emeritus professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, says that God is still here; he is still present through his Spirit. There many bad things happening to us and throughout the world, but God through Jesus has control over it all. But if he is ruler, why is the world in such a mess? Jesus and Paul accepted that one cause of evil in the world is through the prince of this world (Satan), and “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at

work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). Jesus is presently in heaven, advocating on our behalf against the accusations of Satan but also our own foolish actions. As a result, we are now accepted as blameless before God and can boldly approach His throne. We can now ask him things that we were not entitled to do previously. In our Hebrews Scripture reading today it says “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16). So, Jesus is continually working on our behalf if we ask him. Through prayer, Christians are now permitted to enter the throne room of God. It is only through Christ, as the active High Priest over His New Testament Church, that this is possible. It is His responsibility to present their spiritual sacrifices, their prayers, to God the Father. Jesus today is hearing our sung and spoken praises, our petitions, our concerns for ourselves and others, our yearning for social and environmental justice, to restore God’s broken creation.

Building His Church and refining his people

And that leads us to another aspect of Christ’s role in heaven. As Don Whitney of The Center for Biblical Spirituality has stated, another responsibility Christ has is to build, guide and protect the Church (Matt. 16:18). Ephesians 1: 20,22-23 reveals Christ’s role over the Church: “*and gave Him to be the head*

over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all" (1: 23). Just as Jesus worked through His physical body during His earthly ministry, He now works through His spiritual Body—the Church (I Cor. 12:27). Christ is building His Church to fulfill God's plan for humanity. The apostle Peter describes this process: "You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (I Peter 2:5). As a master builder, Christ takes each of these stones to build his Church, like a cathedral where every stone laid is critical for its structure, but here the Church is built of spiritual stones. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Christ places His ministers in the Body to teach, strengthen, counsel and edify its members (I Corinthians 12:18-28). Christ has also been preparing all Christians for positions in the kingdom of God. Jesus told His disciples, in the King James version, "In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2-4). What did He mean by these statements? The term "mansions" means "rooms, abode or residence"—or offices. In ancient Israel and in Herod's rebuilt temple, the Levitical priesthood served in various rooms in the temple of God; these rooms represented positions of authority. Priests not only perform the sacrifices, but other tasks were carried out like checking the quality of the oil, trimming the wicks, counting the funds in the Treasury, selecting Scripture passages. So "mansions" refers to authority. We are being trained now to have responsibility in the Kingdom now and in the future. As Jesus taught his disciples, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are being trained to do God's work on earth as

he would have us do being already planned in heaven. God's servants are being trained now to serve under Christ as kings and priests (Revelation 1:6; 5:10), where the church is called a royal priesthood" (I Peter 2:5). As Ephesians 4:12 says: Jesus *equips the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*" Christ is described in Hebrews 12:2 as the "Author and Finisher" of a Christian's faith. Jesus Christ is, in a sense, helping to finish Christians. Are you yet a finished Christian? What does that mean? Here is what Christ taught: "*Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth*"—spoken in His very first recorded sermon (Matthew 5:5). He understood that Christians do not inherit heaven—they inherit the Earth!

Jesus is also with us, as he said, in the sense of his Spirit ("*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" Matthew 28:20). Even though he reigns in heaven, he has not left us or forsaken us. As the writer of Hebrews in 13:5 states, "*..because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,*" a repetition of God's commitment to the children of Israel in the Desert in Deuteronomy 32:6. But the ministry of the Spirit isn't the physical presence of Jesus. So, I implore to you all: don't lose hope. Don't lose faith like Seamus. God is still here, and He is still present. He is comforting the broken hearted, the lost, and the hurt that people feel when chaos strikes. Jesus is the King who reigns from the cross, reigns in resurrection glory, reigns even now in his mediatorial role, and reigns ultimately in the new heaven and the new earth.

In the words of Ashton Kay, I encourage you to pray, every day, that our world and all the people in it, would be in God's hands and in His good and perfect will. I encourage you to pray for our world, for all of its sin and ugliness and fallen nature. That people would look to God and not to themselves. And I encourage you to pray that Christians everywhere would be a light in the world, and that they wouldn't be afraid to shine even in the darkest of places, because those are the ones that need it the most. It's the world that Jesus himself will bring into this present one, the world that will come down from heaven and make all things new (Revelation 21:1-5). We haven't seen Jesus, but we will see him then. So, let us be ever grateful to Jesus for calling us to be his partners in the Kingdom of God here on earth now and in that more-glorious future. Amen.

Let us pray.

I thank You God for this most amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees. and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything. which is natural which is infinite which is yes. I who have died am alive again today, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we pray that you not only listen to our praises, prayers and petitions but act on them in a timely fashion for we now commit ourselves to be your faithful servants wherever we are, in this sanctuary, on-line, or wherever we are called. Amen.