

**“Jesus Christ is Lord of All!” *Ephesians 1:20b-23***

**Ascension Sunday, May 17, 2015**

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“Forty Days”—this song by Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks, which was actually the cover for a Chuck Berry song called “Thirty Days,” became something of an anthem for my generation of conscripts in the South African Military. It was not about the song as a whole, but just the first line: “I’m gonna give you 40 days to get back home.” For no other reason than the mention of going ‘back home’ in this song, people celebrated 40 days until they were released from their enforced military duties.

Forty days—that number appears in the reading we heard from Acts today. It is not just a number randomly arrived at, however; 40 had been the number of years the People of Israel had spent in the desert before they entered the Promised Land. Forty Days was the time Jesus had spent in the desert fasting, before he was tempted by Satan. And now there is this forty-day period after Jesus had risen from the dead to ascend to “the right hand of God,” as we confess it.

Forty days—the number set by God for the time when he, who had entered our world as a baby, who had suffered and died for us, and who had been raised from the dead, would ascend to the place of all power. Forty days between resurrection and coronation! Paul highlights what this Ascension means for us, when he writes here what his prayer for the church is, namely that we will come to fully understand what it means that JESUS IS LORD OF ALL!

Jesus raised to the right hand of God now is the one who is *far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else in the world or in the world to come*. It is no less important today than it was almost 2,000 years ago to hear this. The reality of the world we live in seems to be that others hold the power—that is what we hear and see. Like the people back then, we are faced by mighty governments and powers, which often leave us as followers of this Lord feeling helpless and powerless—and not seldom afraid.

Paul points us to a different reality—one that is not readily seen or heard. That is why he does not tell them: just look out there and see what Jesus is doing in your world. Instead he prays that they—and we today—*begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him*.

The question many have is, “Why do our lives not reflect this? We want to see his power, and dare we say it? We want his power available to us!”

There have been times in the history of the church when it has believed that it should display the power and glory of the raised and ascended Lord—but these have invariably been times where we have got it wrong. When the church took power into its own hands, it tended to serve the purposes of certain individuals, and did not benefit the people or the church they were meant to serve.

Even though we have history to warn us, we as the church of our Lord, need the reminder that it is not about how we want to exercise power—about how we want to use the money and resources we have at our disposal, but about realizing that the power and authority which Jesus has are *for the benefit of the church*. It is by this great power that lives are changed. It is this incredibly great power that has kept the church going - often when it seemed as if it would be overwhelmed by the forces opposing it.

A case in point is the church in Ethiopia. When the communist takeover in that country took place, the missionaries ‘went home,’ and left the fledgling congregations to their own devices. What would become of the young churches? How would they survive the opposition of the government?

After a wait of almost 17 years of communist rule, the result was there for all to see. The Christian church in Ethiopia did not only carry on existing—the congregations grew! In spite of opposition and persecution, the church in Ethiopia was in much better shape than the old established churches in areas where there was no opposition to church.

How is this possible? How did those who had no power keep going?

If we look at how the church started out—when we get back to the basics, as it is often said—we find a situation much like the one in Ethiopia. Back in Jerusalem there was a group of about 120 believers after the Ascension of Jesus (*Acts 1:15*)—they were the core group from which the church was to grow. This was the church, which Jesus tasked with “making disciples of all nations” (*Matthew 28:20*) and if we consider the leadership group they had, we would be tempted to ask: “Is there a Plan B?”

There was no Plan B then—and there is none to this day. The thing is, however, that Jesus did not just send his disciples out to go and do the best they could. He prefaced the Great Commission with the words: “*I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth.*” And only then did he say, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations...” (*Matthew 28:18-19*)

Because Jesus *is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else in this world or in the world to come, and God has put all things under the authority of Christ*, his church can and will survive. But it will do more:

it will keep on growing by trusting in him, and in all he gives us—because he received ***this authority for the benefit of the church.***

After the political changes that took place in our country in 1994 and subsequently, many have bemoaned the fact that the ‘church’ has lost its influence. That is only partially true, because in most cases the ‘church’ had abandoned its influence by becoming too cozy with those who were in power. I imagine that there will always be this thing of ‘remembering how things were’—but that is not what we have been called to. The church is not about looking back at what we had—not in South Africa, not in the USA.

The call we have is to look forward, not keep on looking over our shoulders at what was. To those disciples who stood there a bit clueless about how things were to be, Jesus instructed them to wait—to look for the coming of his Spirit. This was not to be another 40 days—but 10. We will be reminded again next Sunday of what happened when the power of Christ became apparent in his people. How those who had feared for their lives took courage—literally from above!

The thing is that Jesus Christ did not abandon his church when he ‘ascended to heaven’—instead he is now in every nation and place in heaven and on earth. His commission to us—his church—is that **Jesus wants the message of what he did so that people can return to God once more to be taken to all people.**

In some way the message of the Ascension is to take us out of our comfort zone. We are to look beyond the place where we are concerned with ourselves and with building our little domain; we are to look beyond the place where we make the rules—to the place where he wants us to be, and where we realize that we need him and his power to be the people he has called us to be. That is why—over and over—we are reminded to wait for his Spirit, so that we are shown what he wants done, and how he wants his kingdom to flourish.

Forty days of Jesus appearing to his disciples in the flesh—and now we are to be the visible manifestation of his presence in the world. Paul writes: ***the church is his body; it is filled by Christ, who fills everything everywhere with his presence.*** It is in this church—whether a small gathering or a mega-church—that Christ is present and whatever we do is to be done by his power, and at his direction.

Sometimes we need prompting to take us beyond our boundaries—the kind of prompting that came from persecution in the early church—as it did in Ethiopia and other places. It might be the kind of prompting that comes about when we see numbers in the church decline—or people moving away. But also, it is the kind of prompting when people of different culture, language, and race join the church. This kind of prompting brings us to question what we are doing—and it shows us our limitations. That is a good thing to realize—because it is only when we recognize our

limitations that the church can start to grow beyond our wildest dreams of expectations.

That is what happened to the church in Ethiopia. By trusting in God's power—because they did not have any of their own—a church like the Mekane Yesus Church not only survived, but grew. It is now the largest Lutheran church in Africa with approximately five million members.

What happened 40 days after Jesus broke through the power of death, as he ascended to the place of all power is a reason for us to really celebrate. Now we may know that it does not depend on how strong our faith is to get things done, but that the one we believe in *is Lord of all!*—and that he is present wherever we are with his power for us, his people.