

## Mount of Olives: Pilgrimage and Ascension

Please read Isaiah 52: 7-10, Psalm 84 and Acts 1: 1-12, and then pray; *Almighty God, as we journey with you as pilgrims in this world, grant us the grace to serve well, pray continually, and love faithfully. May our journey be filled with faith, hope, and love until we reach heaven's goal. Amen.*

We are now coming to the end and to the climax of this series of sermons which has focused on the significance of biblical mountains. Since the beginning of 2026, we have given thought to the meaning and importance of 7 mountains, and that does not include the brief excursion we had on the Mount of Beatitudes at our all-age BB Parade Service in early February. We have given serious consideration to the ongoing relevance of these mountains to our faith and to our mission as God's people.

Mount Ararat – The message of God as our resting place, and the God of new beginnings.

Mount of Temptation – The message of confronting and defeating evil.

Mount Sinai – The mountain of shock and awe and the fear of the Lord.

Mount of Transfiguration – The revelation of God's supreme glory in Jesus and our own transformation.

Mount Carmel – The awesome God who hears and answers prayer.

Mount Moriah – Sacrifice and provision made through Jesus.

Unnamed Mountain in Galilee – Commission to go and make disciples.

And now, we come to the blessed Mount of Olives – this great mountain on the east side of Jerusalem, a mountain which was clearly significant to Jesus during the final week of his life, but even beyond his death and resurrection – this mountain continued to feature in salvation history as Jesus ascended from here forty days after his resurrection. (Acts 1) Let us begin by considering the place and significance of the Mount of Olives in the last week of Jesus's life.

The week began with Jesus descending this mountain or hill on the Sunday before Good Friday. We refer to it as Palm Sunday. Jesus famously and prophetically descends on a donkey to the cheers of disciples and Passover pilgrims in fulfilment of a prophecy in Zechariah (9:9) and to the shouts of prophetic Psalms. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna! (Psalm 118: 25-27)*

We soon realise that Jesus will retreat to the Mount of Olives many times during this fateful week. He will return to this mountain to pray, to teach, and to make his way back to the refuge of Bethany. Listen to what Luke writes in his gospel (21:37-38). *'Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.'* Jesus is back and forth from the Mount of Olives. In Luke 22: 39 we read: *'Jesus went out **as usual** to the Mount of Olives, and his disciple followed him.'*

Next, we have Jesus looking over Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and teaching his disciples about the destruction of the temple, the end of the age, and his own coming in glory and power. (Matthew 24:3f) After this we have the famous scene of Jesus retreating to the Garden of Gethsemane on the final night of his life after the last supper. This is Jesus's prayer mountain. He prays at the foot of this mountain in an olive grove. His disciples fall asleep while he agonises in prayer. He is arrested in this garden. Judas knows where to bring the mob. This is one of Jesus favourite spots for prayer retreat.

Jesus will ascend back to his Father from the Mount of Olives. This is the Mount of Ascension. (Acts 1:12) An angel reports that Jesus will return one day in the same way the disciples have seen him go – and perhaps to the same place? When Jesus returns in glory – will he make his way directly to the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem? A prophecy from Zechariah suggests this. (14:4) *'On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west...*

Jesus returning to this mountain and to Jerusalem bringing in the fullness of His glorious Kingdom throughout the earth. The Kingdom finally and fully coming to earth. *God's will on earth as it is in heaven.* The same place where Jesus cried out from the garden of tears – 'Not my will but yours.' Perhaps this is salvation destiny? Who knows but God?

**The last period of Jesus's life is bookmarked by action from the Mount of Olives.** He descends from the summit as he enters Jerusalem triumphantly accompanied by his disciples. He ascends from the summit back to his Father in full view of his disciples. He descends in humility on a donkey; he ascends with all glory, honour, authority, and power after his resurrection! (Matthew 28:16) Welcomed into Jerusalem one day – 40 days later welcomed into heaven from this mountain. One day sitting on a donkey. 40 days later returning heading home to sit on a throne!

I think there are two magnificent themes that we can particularly relate to as modern day disciples of Jesus which connect us to the Mount of Olives. Those two highly relevant themes are **pilgrimage and ascension**. I want to demonstrate to you now, that we are pilgrims on a journey, but we are also those who have, even now, ascended with Jesus in a deep and spiritually profound sense, and we are seated in heavenly places with him. (Ephesians 2: 6, 1:3)

Let us start with *pilgrimage*. You may prefer the word 'journey,' but I am going to stick with the idea of pilgrimage because 'pilgrimage' carries with it distinct religious and spiritual connotations. Here is a definition of the word: *'A pilgrimage is a purposeful, often long journey to a holy or significant place, undertaken for spiritual, devotional and transformative reasons, typically resulting in personal reflection or a deeper connection to the place.'* Pilgrimages always involve leaving home, setting aside dedicated time; they are not rushed; they are devotional and transformational.

The idea of pilgrimage in the bible is not uncommon. Jacob, son of Isaac, son of the great Abraham, refers to his life as a great pilgrimage, a journey with God and for God. When he is introduced to Pharaoh by his exalted son Joseph, Jacob describes his life in this way: *'The years of my pilgrimage are hundred and fifty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of my fathers.'* (Genesis 47:9) For Jacob, the whole of his life has been a pilgrimage, one which will end soon as he goes to be with his fathers and his God?

How long has your pilgrimage been in this world? How long have you lived with a personal knowledge and experience of the grace of God? How long have you walked with God in this world? As things stand right now, my earthly pilgrimage has been 61.5 years. I have consciously walked with God about 47 of those years. The start of my journey with God included baptism. I will, by God's grace, reach the presence of my Heavenly Father and Saviour as Jacob did. What about you? What is length of your pilgrimage? Can you trace the faithful and loving hand of God in your journey?

We began today's service with words from Psalm 84 – a Psalm of pilgrimage – pilgrimage to Jerusalem which was part of Jewish life. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem and to 3 festivals took place to worship and to honour God's call and law, and were inspirational and unifying for the nation's population. Psalm 84 is one of my favourite Psalms. Let me read some of the key verses relating to pilgrimage. (READ Psalm 84: 5-7) As a Jew, this undoubtedly refers to journeying to Jerusalem for the great festivals described in the law of Moses. For the Christian, this is life's journey with Christ, with the continual help of the Spirit, which will end, by God's grace and mercy, in the heavenly Zion – God's eternal dwelling place. (Hebrews 12: 22f)

As the great John Newton wrote –

*'Saviour, if of Zion's city, I through grace a member am.*

*Let the world deride or pity – I will glory in your name.  
Fading is the worldling's pleasure – all is boasted pomp and show;  
solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know.'*

To repeat the great words of Psalm 84 once more; *'They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.'*

When Jesus descended the Mount of Olives, he was coming to Jerusalem **for the Passover** – the feast that remembered and rejoiced in the historical exodus from Egypt. Passover lambs were being prepared for sacrifice. Jesus was conscious of his role and calling to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. (John 1:29, 35). But the Mount of Olives was a great hill thousands and thousands of pilgrims climbed and descended on their way to holy festivals. The Mount of Olives and the journey of pilgrims are deeply connected in the Jewish faith.

Jesus would have crossed this mountain as a boy journeying with his parents and wider family as they came for Passover. Remember the story of when he was just 12 years old? (Luke 2: 41) *'Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover.'* Jesus would have loved the sight of the Mount of Olives. He would have walked over it many times. Once you have reached this mountain, Zion awaited! You would be able to see your blessed destination – Zion's hill – the temple. Songs and psalms would be sung as you approached the dwelling place of the living God.

Today, you and I need to give thanks that we are pilgrims on an epic journey – one that began with surrender to Jesus, the joy of receiving Jesus as Saviour, the sacrament of baptism, the infilling of the Spirit. It is a journey that requires many things which God willingly and graciously supplies us with. What does God give you for your pilgrimage?

We are given *grace and peace with God* to begin this journey in the first place. We are given a new heart to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are given a heart to worship and serve him only. We are given a heart fixed on Zion. We sing the songs of Zion. And there can be times in our lives when our love for God fades or grows cold. But God will and does renew our love and our desire to worship and glorify the God who called us to walk with Him. Is today a day where you need to seek a renewed love for God through the Spirit as you continue a wonderful journey?

We also need strength for the journey, spiritual strength, and stamina – rather like the Israelites needed in the wilderness on their journey to the promised land. Psalm 84 speaks about pilgrims going from 'strength to strength' until they reach Zion. God can and does give us the strength each of us needs to endure and see the journey through. There may be times when he carries us as on eagles' wings – but he will enable us to be strengthened repeatedly in the "inner man" through the power of his Spirit. (Ephesians 3:16) We will not be left or forsaken.

They were be very difficult and testing times on this journey to Zion. Psalm 84 refers to them as 'the valley of Baca.' These are the dry times, the times of aridity and weakness; but rather than these being your downfall, they can be places and times you discover new and vital living springs of God's grace, comfort, love, and provision. *'Grace which like the Lord the giver, never fails from age to age.'* Whatever we need for the journey, God will supply the need for each of his children. This includes the need for companions on the road. When Jesus went to Passover as a boy and at other times, he never went alone. He went with his parents and neighbours from Nazareth. Later in life he went with male and female disciples. With regards to our pilgrimage, God sets us within a family – the family of his Church. We must travel with others, for fellowship, support, accountability, and encouragement.

How many Churches have supported you on your pilgrimage over the years? Do you give thanks for being part of a family of believers and co-travellers? You will not make it on your own. You need the pastoral and family support of a living and vibrantly caring Church fellowship! Do you have that? Are you part of that here? And do you actively contribute to this community of faith for the sake of others?

And of course, on this journey we enjoy and know the faithful, continual presence and care of our God. And perhaps it is helpful to see God as the good Shepherd of all pilgrims. (Psalm 23) The Shepherd who will supply all our wants and needs. The Shepherd who will always safely and carefully lead and guide us. The Shepherd who will protect us from wolves and other enemies. The Lord Jesus is our good Shepherd and the One who oversees and cares for our souls – enough to die for them. Maybe you need to take time today to read Psalm 23, and then give thanks for all the ways your good Shepherd has led you thus far on your faiths journey. *‘Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life (my pilgrimage) and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.’ (Psalm 23:6)*

The Mount of Olives not only turns our eyes and attention towards pilgrimage but also towards **ascension**. This is the Mount of Ascension!! And for the Christian, this is not about how we ‘ascend’ to be with the Lord at the end of our earthly pilgrimage. It is about that, but it is also about the fact that we are *presently seated with him in the heavenly realms*. Ascension and victory are part of our life and faith now! Listen to these precious words from Ephesians which speak about reality *now* for all who are “in Christ.” **(Read Ephesians 1:3, 2:6)**

As the apostle Paul explains on so many occasions Christians are ‘in Christ.’ We are gloriously and eternally united to Him – the One who now reigns in heaven, and the One who is described as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. We are spiritually united to him, deeply connected to Jesus. The bible teaches that Jesus’s followers are united to Christ in his death, burial, resurrection, ascension and second coming. We died with him; we were buried with him; we were raised with him and we are now seated in the heavenlies with him. All saints will be together at Christ’s return. Paul writes to the Colossians about our present reality because of our relationship to and union with Jesus.

**‘Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts in things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above and not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ‘(Colossians 3: 1-4)**

Our lives are now ‘hidden with Christ in God.’ Spiritually with and united to the Son of God our Saviour and Lord in heaven. Our lives are in him – hidden, kept, protected, and secured in the eternal love of God and of Christ his Son. By setting our minds on this wonderful reality, are we in danger of being so heavenly minded that we are of little earthly use? That is often an accusation thrown at Christians and the Church.

It is the exact opposite, because we are in Christ and presently in his kingdom and in the heavenlies, we are inspired and highly motivated to pray and work hard for the coming of Christ’s kingdom on the earth. Just as Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives for God’s will to be done, so Christians pray and serve with a view to God’s kingdom being established here. On our earthly journey’s, we work for the coming of God’s peace, justice, righteousness, and light.

This is why a heavenly minded Christian like William Wilberforce could energetically work for the abolition of slavery. God’s will and kingdom honour all humanity as made in the image of God. Slavery was and is a moral affront to God’s purposes. Followers of Jesus should always be at the forefront of action on earth which seeks to promote and establish peace, justice, and liberty for humankind. Are we ready to serve God with fresh vision and energy? Did you realise that you ‘have been raised with

Christ' through his resurrection and ascension – and you are called to therefore give your all for the kingdom of heaven on earth? Your life 'is now hidden with Christ in God,' but how active was Christ when he lived and walked upon this earth? Remember how Jesus cared for the poor, healed the sick, delivered the oppressed! We are now Christ's hands and feet in this world, in this local community. We are called to service – to love our neighbours and to pray and fight for the wellbeing of all. This is a large part of the challenge of our earthly pilgrimage, and large part of our personal response to being 'in Christ' in the heavenly realms. We serve on earth but we also present with Christ in heavenly places!

May God fill us with His Spirit of love and power as we 'set our hearts and minds on pilgrimage.' (Psalm 84:5). May God strengthen us as we pray with Christ in Gethsemane – 'your will be done not mine' – Your will be done **on earth as it is in heaven.**'

May we complete our pilgrimage here and remain faithful to Christ to the end – until we appear before God in Zion.

Amen.

(Revd Peter J Clarkson 12.4.26)