

SERMON BY REV W HUIZINGA

ON GOD'S WORD

AS WE CONFESS IT IN

LORD'S DAY 18

OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

LITURGY

Votum and Salutation

Psalm 47:1

Confession of Faith - Nicene Creed

Psalm 47:2,3

Prayer for the Opening of God's Word

Thankoffering

Psalm 68:7,8

Read - Lord's Day 18

- Col. 3:1-11

Sermon

YOUR LORD ASCENDED FOR YOUR ADVANTAGE

- 1. The reality of your ascended Lord.***
- 2. The riches from your ascended Lord.***
- 3. The return of your ascended Lord.***

Hymn 31:1,2,3

Pastoral Prayer

Hymn 31:4,5

Benediction

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

A man came from the distant land of Australia to meet, to court and to win his bride in Europe. He lavished his love on her, gave her presents and pledged his love. They became engaged to be married. He asked her to marry him. She said, *yes, with all my heart!* But there was a catch. First he had to go back to that distant land he came from to prepare a home in the forests, and to make arrangements. She would have to wait. To chop down tall trees, to make a home and to start a farm takes time. He wanted things to be ready. Then to sail the oceans back to Europe takes a long, long time! They both longed for the day they would meet again.

Jesus is your heavenly Bridegroom. He came from heaven to earth to claim you. When He was on earth He won you by paying the ultimate price - his own lifeblood. He bought you as his bride. As the hymn says,

*From heaven He came and sought her
To be his holy bride;
With his own blood He bought her
And for her life He died (Hymn 40, stanza 1).*

Yet, as sad as it may appear, the Bridegroom decided, for the advantage of his bride, that it was necessary and better for Him to go away to a distant place for a while. He needs to prepare things for his bride. So Jesus ascended into heaven, sat the right hand of his father, until the Day He can come in glory with all the holy angels and all the saints. At first this news discouraged the bride; they all were sad and felt forsaken. Yet after they learned what it all meant for them, they understood. Indeed, when Jesus Christ our Lord actually departed from them, *they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God.* How is it possible that a bride rejoices when her Bridegroom leaves? Does the departure, the ascension of Christ not give reason for mourning? You would think so. Yet as part of the bride, you must learn to understand and believe that the ascension is for your good, for your advantage.

I preach to you the Word of God as we confessed it in Lord's Day 18 under this *THEME:

YOUR LORD ASCENDED FOR YOUR ADVANTAGE.

- 1. The reality of your ascended Lord.***
- 2. The riches from your ascended Lord.***
- 3. The return of your ascended Lord.***

1. The reality of your ascended Lord.

We believe Jesus ascended from earth up into heaven. Forty days after He rose from the dead He met with his disciples at the Mount of Olives, and in the sight of all his disciples ascended up into the sky. The disciples saw Him travel upwards and upwards until a

cloud took Him out of their sight. This is the apostolic testimony on which we are based as an apostolic church.

How do you know this? The Bible tells it so. It's as simple as that.

Yet it should not surprise us that many today find Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven unbelievable, even outdated. After all, we all know the basic laws of science. You students all learn about the laws of gravity very quickly. Weighty objects like bodies fall to the ground. They do not go floating up into the sky. If they did, we would all become champion high-jumpers!

It is true that gravity keeps our feet on the ground. Good thing! But do these laws also apply to the body of our Lord Jesus Christ? Last week we confessed how Jesus by his own power stood up out of the grave. We cannot do that. After his resurrection we read in the gospel that Jesus had a real body. He could eat and drink. Thomas could touch Him. Mary Magdalene tried to cling to Him. But He could just appear like that and then disappear again in the same mode. He could enter a room through closed, locked doors! You see, we confess in this Lord's Day that Jesus is both God and man. Without a doubt, as God, who created all things according to certain laws, stands above these laws. They do not bind or limit Him as they do limit us.

Let's apply this to Jesus' ascension into heaven. Man has sent countless spaceships to explore our planetary system. A rocket sent up years ago still travels through space. It may have passed Uranus but it has not reached the limits of the planets, let alone the starry heavens or even our galaxy. How then could Jesus in a few minutes travel with speed faster than light into heaven?

Again, remember that Jesus is God as well as man. Remember too that God the Father can send a cavalcade of angels to transport his Son honourably to Him.

Yes, a cloud *took him up* out of their sight. Literally, it says that the cloud transported him up. It does not say the cloud blocked their view, but rather that the cloud acted as a chariot to receive Him up, take Him up. Brothers and sisters, boys and girls, does this not make you think. Think of the cloud of glory that led Israel, that led them or took them up through the waters of the Red Sea. That glorious cloud of God's presence carried them, protected them, directed them on their journeys. That cloud covered the tabernacle. A cloud full of the glorious presence of God enveloped Jesus and the apostles on the mount of Transfiguration. Acts 1 says a cloud took Him up. This was a wonderful cloud of glory. It acted as a royal vehicle, a royal carriage, to transport the Son of God in stately majesty into heaven. God was honouring his Son who had obeyed his will to the very end. In prayer Jesus had prayed for his glory (John 17:5). Now the Father starts to super-exalt him. The cloud is at one and the same time the vehicle which envelops Jesus and transports him away to the throne room of glory in heaven. This is how He ascended. This is how He will descend. Revelations tells us that Jesus shall return on the clouds and we shall be taken up in the clouds to Him and to the saints. They

are all clouds where Jesus is present, where the glory of God is present. Royal chariots!

Luke who writes Acts 1, along with the disciples, needed to believe Jesus ascended in the glorious cloud into heaven. They did. How many actually saw Jesus in heaven? Few! Paul did (2 Cor 12). So did Stephen (Acts 7:55). John the apostle, on the island of Patmos, saw the ascended Lord, full of majesty and glory and power and authority (Rev 1+2). The rest of us believe it.

Is this important? Yes, it is! In heaven Jesus repairs the damage our rebellion in the Garden of Eden caused. God expelled us. God did not come personally to walk and talk with his people after that, but appeared in other ways at special times only. A separation occurred. A chasm yawned. Your sins put distance between God and you. Fellowship stops between heaven and earth. Jesus started to restore this fellowship by his death on the cross. God accepted the atoning death. God opened the prison door of his grave. Jesus arose. Jesus' ascension forms the next step forward in restoring the fellowship between repentant, restored saints and God in heaven. As Paul (Eph 1:10) says, *He gathers together in one all things in Christ Jesus, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him* (Jesus, the ascended Lord). *Jesus reconciles all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of his cross* (Col 1:20). Jesus brings heaven and earth together.

Finally we have a real human being who has authority and power to do this. The distance between God in heaven and sinners on earth is bridged by the ascended Lord. Jesus brings us together. He reconciles us. We know there is still work to do. Your daily sins threaten to widen the gulf between you and God. Daily you need to ask for the grace of God to keep yourself close to Him. What a treat to have your Mediator in heaven!

Does this mean that Jesus is in heaven only? Is Jesus *not with us even to the end of the age*, as He promised? These are important questions. We again face the point that Jesus is both man and God. You and I cannot fathom that miracle completely. Yet there are certain things we may and must state. **As man** Jesus is in heaven and stays there until He comes to judge the living and the dead. The NT speaks of Jesus' **coming**. It means that He is not here as yet. He is still in heaven and we await our Saviour from heaven (Phil 3:20).

As God Jesus is omnipresent, present everywhere. Jesus as God walks up and down among all his lampstands, also his lampstand here in Armadale. Jesus knows everything about you. As God Jesus is omniscient, all-knowing.

These are the two truths we may and must keep clear.

At the time when the Heidelberg Catechism was written the sacramental war with some extreme followers of Luther raged. This war divided the churches of the Reformation.

The ascension of Christ and the celebration of the Lord's Supper became interrelated. The question was "*how is Christ present **as a man** on earth and thus how is He present **as a man** at the Lord's*

Supper?" We confess that Jesus' ascension into heaven means that as a man He is no longer on earth, and thus He **as a man** is not present at the Lord's Supper? The *epigoni* or extreme followers of Luther stated Jesus' ascension acted as a promotion so that as a man Jesus is now like God and can be everywhere present. Of course He is especially present at the supper dedicated to his remembrance, they claimed. You can thus see, brothers and sisters, boys and girls, the connection between the ascension and the Lord's Supper. The ascension of Jesus thus received considerable attention. The catechism devotes no less than five questions and answers to it.

Is Jesus as a man at the Lord's Supper table? We believe, as a man, Jesus is He far away, in heaven? A distant boy-friend may write his girl love-letters. He may spend much of his hard-earned money to support her. He can talk long-distance on the telephone or the skype-phone with her. They may even have cameras on their computers so that they can see each other. Then the distance seems to vanish; it is as though you are so close together; his voice is so clear. His smile assures her that his thoughts are constantly with her. Now, that is how Jesus as a man is with us today.

But does this not leave us reformed people with meagre little comfort? Is the ascension then not a step backwards instead of forwards? No! As quoted in our introduction, the disciples returned with joy, praising God after the ascension. It was indeed a loss; for a bride misses her Bridegroom. Yet they knew it was for their advantage, as He had taught them. Four loaded words signal this benefit of the reality of his ascension - ***His divinity, majesty, grace and spirit are never absent from us.*** These four terms - pointing to realities, not dreams - show how the Bridegroom busily supports his bride. He works hard to erase the distance between heaven and earth. The Lord's Supper constantly reminds you that He works hard to prepare the union of heaven and earth.

Jesus is with you every day. When you are sick, when you grieve, when you have worries, when you rejoice, when you have to write exams, when you have financial worries, Jesus is here with you. Jesus is God. Jesus has godly majesty. From heaven He can move mountains in answer to prayers. You can see his majesty as he upholds the earth, the oceans, the skies, the trees and animals, especially as we see a loaded table, we see his majesty. Jesus shows us grace - he forgives us all our sins. Everyday again! Jesus sent down the Holy Spirit to live with you and in you. The Spirit works faith, strengthens faith. The Spirit makes you understand the Bible.

Through these four realities Jesus works from heaven, from his headquarters on high. On earth He could only be in one place at a time. From heaven He has power and authority to reach to his bride in all nations and in all localities at the same time. Jesus' keen interest and involvement with his bride on earth has not diminished at all, but rather increased manifold. He gathers his bride from all nations now. That means He has kept his pledge to be with us till the end of the age, not in spite of his ascension, but rather by means of his

ascension! From heaven Jesus can and does support his bride over all the earth! Already you see how the reality of Jesus' ascension into heaven brings you real results. You cannot divorce the reality of his ascension from the benefits it brings. But we move on to...

2. The riches from your ascended Lord.

Jesus works from his heavenly headquarters to prepare our home, to arrange all things so that God can live together with his people on a brand new world. To do this Jesus actively works in heaven to prepare the new earth, the holy city. But Jesus also works on earth to prepare you, his people or his bride. There is so much to do before the great union occurs.

The catechism stresses what Jesus does in heaven for you here on earth. In heaven Jesus is your advocate. Notice how throne of heaven is the center. Archangels like Gabriel and prophets like Moses dwell in heaven, but none has the position and privilege Jesus has on the throne. Jesus enjoys authority over everything in heaven and on earth. You have the most powerful contact person! Jesus did not attain this glory for Himself. Oh no! Not like those who climb Mt Everest for their own satisfaction and glory - not at all. But rather He operates like a pathfinder, a pioneer who goes on ahead, to blaze a path, to find good land to settle, to prepare the way for his bride, whom he longs to bring here as soon as possible.

Jesus is **your advocate** at the right hand of God. He *indeed intercedes for you* (Rom 8:34). How much Peter needed the prayers of Jesus! How much you and I need the prayers of our ascended Lord. When you like Peter in the garden neglect prayer, when you blindly and foolishly head for spiritual disaster, Jesus prays for you. And what an advocate! Some lawyers promise much but you must await the trial to see if they can deliver on their word. Will you be declared *not guilty*? You await the Judge's verdict with nervous tension. But with Jesus there is no question about the outcome. What He asks from the Father, is given. Jesus has rights with the Father. It is his reward.

Deep in troubles, you may despair, thinking that God has forsaken you. You pray. God in reality never leaves you. Jesus passes on your prayer. *Father, you forsook me; You may not forsake this sheep of mine.* That is his prayer for for you. God's presence does not leave you. God carries you.

Attacked in your faith, you pray. Christ prays too. *Father, I prayed for him/her; I made my name known to them; they believe; keep them in your Word, for the sake of your and my glory.* He prays so you can endure.

You pray for forgiveness for some terrible sins. God cannot rage against you anymore. Jesus takes your prayer and sends it purified to his Father. Jesus died for your sins. Father cannot hold these sins against you any longer. He prays for forgiveness for you.

Listen to your Belgic Confession about this (Art 26):

But this Mediator, whom the Father has appointed between Him and us, ought in no wise to affright us by His majesty, or cause us to seek another according to our fancy. For there is no creature, either in heaven or on earth, who loves us more than Jesus Christ; who, though existing in the form of God, yet emptied himself, being made in the likeness of men and of a servant for us, and in all things was made like unto his brethren. If, then, we should seek for another mediator who would be favorably inclined towards us, whom could we find who loved us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies? And if we seek for one who has power and majesty, who is there that has so much of both as He who sits at the right hand of God and to whom hath been given all authority in heaven and on earth? And who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God?

Jesus is the most influential, most loved and most powerful mediator possible for you. So there is no need to pray to saints. He prays for you. Though you never hear those prayers, they ascend and are heard. How you need them!

Oh the riches you receive from Christ's ascension!

Heaven is your haven. Jesus in his prayer in John 17 tells his Father that he takes guests along – *Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world* (v. 24). Jesus does not want to be all alone in heaven. In John 14 Jesus thus tells you He goes to prepare you a place. His pledge thus is that his own flesh and blood existence, though glorified, reminds him of you in the same way that the engagement ring of a prospective bridegroom reminds him of his bride to be.

You, his bride, as it were wear a ring too. Jesus sent down the Holy Spirit on you. The Spirit acts like a ring, reminding you to look up, to await your Bridegroom from heaven and to seek all things you need from above as we read in Colossians 3. Jesus seeks your love. Recall what we hear in the Form for the Lord's Supper (p.598), *For by his death Jesus has removed the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, which is sin, and obtained for us the life-giving Spirit...and glory.*

Seek the things above. Heaven is your headquarters! Your citizenship is in heaven. Heaven sets the norms for you. Heaven gives you a godly set of priorities. Not earth with its pursuits, but heaven, sets the standard. What type of lifestyle does Jesus prescribe for us? Read the rest of Colossians 3. Elders often read from this chapter on home-visits. It is practical, down to earth. Lead a godly life, according to the teachings of Jesus.

Why is heaven so very important? Your Bridegroom is there. Your Father is there. Jesus comes from there! You pray to our Father in heaven for food, for grace, and for the Spirit. You report to heaven. Your loved ones are there. The new earth comes from there. In fact Paul says in Eph 2:6-7 *God who is rich in mercy raised us up together*

and made us sit together (now already!) in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus that in ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of his grace in Christ Jesus. Yes, the riches of Christ's ascension! This brings us to...

3. The return of your ascended Lord.

The next Lord's Day confesses the coming of Jesus from heaven to earth to judge the living and the dead. Yet we need to complete our confession about the ascension of Jesus by speaking of his return. Jesus' entrance into heaven speaks of an open heaven where your prayers are heard. Jesus' ascension to the royal throne of glory speaks of the re-uniting of heaven and earth. What Adam and Eve ruined, Jesus restores. The chasm between God and man, which they caused, Jesus bridges. Jesus makes all things new.

As bride do you not long for the return of your Bridegroom? He unites you around Himself. He gives you a wonderful home. He throws his arms around you, wiping every tear out of your eyes.

Even now by his Spirit you look up to the clouds that transported Jesus to heaven. Those clouds will bring Him back.

Though not having seen Him, you love Him. Though now you do not see Him, yet you believe in Him. You rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet 1:8). One day you will see Him with your own eyes. You will embrace Him with your arms. He will throw his arms around you. No more separation!

What a joyous union!

Are you ready for it? Be ready! Be watchful! Do not allow the original gulf between you and God to come back because of unconfessed sins. Do not become obsessed by the things here on earth. Things here on earth pass away. Look to what stays, stays forever. Your ascended Lord guarantees this.

Amen.