

Seated at the right hand of the Father

Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 21 October 2018

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Bible Readings: Hebrews 1:1-6; Mark 10: 35-45



So. We have had a season of creation, here at Cashmere, a focus on care for the environment. We have had some special services celebrating our life as a church, our 90th anniversary and our AGM. Before that we had a long series from the Old Testament, on Samuel and King David. So, I think it is time for some theology. If you hate the idea of talking theology feel free to get comfortable and ready for a little nap. But I hope that most of you might bear with me this morning and through November as we open up some curious questions about God.

Today I want to push further into this question of where is God. Specifically, ‘where is Jesus Christ?’ Because our creed gives us a very specific answer to this question. Can you read on in your bulletins into the Nicene Creed, in the middle section about

Jesus. It says: *On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

According to our Christian tradition, and this is mentioned several times in the Bible so the creed writers didn’t just make this up, Jesus is **seated at the right hand of the Father**

But what on earth does that mean?

First problem: God does not actually have hands, not even a right hand. And he does not have a bottom that he can sit on. So it is a metaphor, a way of describing something that is not actually so. It is a word picture. The word picture is of God the Father with Jesus sat down beside him.

I found you an icon with this picture on it, there’s a simple black& white image of someone’s painting of this as an icon on your bulletin.

Now it’s your turn to do some work on this. Tell me more about this metaphor. When you hear that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, tell me, where are they sitting? Fill our the word picture for me. Describe the scene that is in your mind’s eye when you think of heaven.

Our imaginations have been shaped most by images of monarchy. When we think of God sitting in heaven, our minds jump straight to a throne room. Hands up who pictured God and Jesus seated on a throne?

Fair enough. A throne is a seat of power. It is a symbol of status and wealth and authority. And there is some Biblical use of the word ‘throne’ so it’s not wrong. We can picture two thrones, side by side, God and Jesus, co-ruling, both high and lifted up, adored by angels and swirled around by the Spirit. Or maybe they’re on a two-seater sofa throne.

People in Christian history got a bit tangled up with this, and had arguments about who was the boss and how and was Jesus seated below the Father, was Jesus like Prime Minister, the one who made things happen on behalf of God. Us poor people try to project out our models of how the world is onto God ... but it can’t be a hierarchy and still be Trinity. If you’re willing to believe this outrageous idea that God is three persons and still one being then all three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, must be co-equal, co-eternal, wrapped up together as one power.

So saying that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God has been for the church through the ages a way of saying that Jesus shares with God as King of Heaven, Lord of all.

According to both Luke's and Matthew's gospel, Jesus when he stood before the Chief Priests on trial for his life claimed exactly this about himself. Let's hear from Matthew:

Matthew 26:

⁶² The high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah,⁶³ the Son of God." ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your verdict?" They answered, "He deserves death."

And the end of Mark's Gospel puts this most explicitly, describing the ascension:

16: ¹⁹ So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it

Actually, this complicates the question of where is Jesus, because these last 2 verses of Mark's gospel seem to contradict each other. In verse 16 Jesus goes up into heaven and sits down at the right hand of God. In verse 17 Jesus is with his disciples, working with them, continuing to do wonderful things. Hang on a minute, which is it? Is Jesus in heaven or on earth? If he's sitting in heaven how can he be also working on earth?

The answer takes us back to the Trinity of course – Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit, together alive, together filling Heaven, and together at work on Earth. That's the Spirit, I guess, doing what Jesus did when he was around, still recognisably Jesus but in a spirit form, in the disciple's hearts and actions. God here with us, in us, individually and collectively.

So far so good. But I'm still bothered about the throne thing. It just does not work for me very well as a metaphor. I can picture God the Father telling Jesus what to do and Jesus telling the Spirit what to do in a kind of military chain of command ... and it just does not feel right to me. How about you?

And you know why it does not feel right to have a throne-room metaphor for the Trinity? Mainly because that simply was not how Jesus described the kingdom of heaven.

His followers were keen on the whole chain-of-command hierarchy of status thing. Jesus tried and tried to tell them that heaven was not like a Roman Empire command headquarters ... but still they kept on at him, wanting status for themselves. Today's reading has the Zebedee brothers cooking up this plan for a deal with Jesus for the seats to his left and right, in other words to be his top two generals. And Jesus – poor Jesus – he does not even seem angry in his reaction to them, though the other disciples certainly were! Jesus just sounds tired to me. Like, really? After all I've told you and shown you, you're still wheeling and dealing, really? So he doesn't yell at them. He talks from his pain, his cup of suffering, his baptism of agony – do you really want to share this? He asks them. This is what power in heaven entails. He talks to them of serving, waiting tables, slavery, self-giving.

And when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of heaven he does talk a couple of times about sitting on the throne of glory surrounded by the angels, all command in his hands. But mostly Jesus talks

about sitting at table with the tax collectors and prostitutes, holding only bread in his hands, and offering forgiveness not judgement. Mostly when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven he describes it as a wedding feast. A funny upside down feast where the VIPs are served last and the nobodies get the seats of honour.

So the answer to the question 'where is Jesus?' that most interests me gets me to this – that Jesus, the Father and the Spirit are hosting a feast and are sitting together laughing and welcoming and eating and drinking. This is the picture that Jesus painted ... heaven as a dinner party. Heaven as belonging and friendship, celebration and abundance, with the angels washing the dishes!

This is glory – not blinding light

This is authority – shared, not hierarchical

This is power and majesty, that does not demand that we bow and scrape on the floor, but invites us to eat of power and drink of power, to pull up a chair and join in.

Where is God??

I asked the children and the adults on Sunday this question. How would you answer it? The Cashmere folks answered with

- a) God is everywhere
- b) God is in our hearts
- c) God is love and in our relating

... which as I said are all excellent true answers, but not the one I had in mind ...

*OK kids I have a tough question for you today. And it is a question that has lots of right answers, but I have one particular answer in my mind and I am going to keep on asking for possible answers until I get the answer that is in my mind. So it's a bit tricky. Are you ready? Here it is **Where is God?***

A clue – how does the Lord's prayer start: Our Father in heaven.

So one possible answer to the question 'where is God?' is: God is in heaven.

Which obviously leads us to the next question – where on earth is heaven? Or maybe heaven is not on earth at all. And people have been up into the sky so we know it's not up there. So where is it?

The answer I always give to this is that heaven is another dimension. Our bodies and everything we can see and touch is in the physical dimension and heaven is in the spiritual dimension.

Heaven is where God is, where God has no limits, where God's power and beauty and grace and love is all there is.

Once upon a time it used to be that the human world was cut off from God's heaven – like there was a massive wall in the road. But God sent Jesus to us from heaven, and Jesus's main job was to break down the wall between us people and heaven ... but this was easier said than done. In fact, the only way he could get this job done was to give his life, to die on the cross. It was that difficult. And because Jesus gave everything he had for us, God was able to burst through the wall between earth and heaven, and Jesus is alive both in heaven and on earth at the same time.

It's the greatest most amazing miracle of all time.

And it means that we can know heaven in our lives, just a little bit ... and we believe that at the end of our lives here on earth we will step through the wall, easy as anything, into heaven, and there we will see God face to face and live for ever in his power and beauty and love.