‘His only hands are ours’? Ascension and Mission

Sermon: for St Barnabas Presbyterian Church, Plimmerton
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Reading: Acts 1:6-11

I wonder what you were up to in the first half of the 1990s. I must say it feels like a very long time ago. I was in my early 20s, and I was the National Youth Co-ordinator for the Methodist Church. They were interesting times. The Methodist Church was a lot bigger back then. Lots of churches still had youth groups, and we had big youth conferences. I also went to the main Methodist Church Conference every year. One of my memories is on the surface quite a trivial thing, but somehow it has stayed with me and continued to bother me. It was yet another report from yet another national committee – this one from the Communications Department. They presented with great fan-fare a new poster they had printed, hundreds and hundreds of them for us to take away and put up in our churches. It had a picture of an outreached hand, and the words, “His only hands are ours” printed large. It was an encouragement to mission and service. “His only hands are ours”
What happened next was a major debate sparked by the feminists in the conference who were offended that they had used ‘He’ rather than ‘God’, and the Communications people said that really they meant Jesus rather than God and it all got rather heated. But for me that was missing the point. Is it really true the Christ’s only hands are ours? What is that saying about our theology of Christ and our understanding of the church?

This statement neatly sums up the theological position known as liberal humanism.

Let’s imagine for a moment that there are two levels of reality. One is the tangible world, the human, physical and social world we can see and touch.
And the other is the spiritual world, the realm beyond, the intangible, invisible.
In theological terms this is the immanent, and this (typically pictured above) is the transcendent.
Back in the 1990s the Methodist church was profoundly split between churches that majored on the spiritual – we called them the evangelicals – and those, the majority, who majored on the earthly – they were called the liberals. A similar split existed in the Presbyterian church, but it was a bit more 50-50. This church, I would guess, found itself firmly in the evangelical camp.
A ‘liberal’ worldview soundly rejected the transcendent. Many faithful Christians, including my father, genuinely believed that the resurrection of Jesus was a symbolic event, in which the divine loving power of God was released into the world, through the church. The mission and purpose of the church is to bring about the Kingdom of God in this earth in our own time, through our own efforts. Christ’s only hands are ours.

Opposing this was the evangelical worldview, which reached heaven-ward, seeing this life on earth as a important but short pathway leading to a gateway into the much more

important eternal existence, in the spiritual realm of immortality. Evangelicals classically believe that all human beings possess an immortal soul, a part of us, which will spend eternity either in heaven with God or in hell with the devil. In this worldview our bodies and this earth are like clothing which gets discarded, cast off as our true nature steps into eternity – ultimately irrelevant. The best thing our hands can do is to lead people the point of decision, and point away from this world towards the next.

I'm sure you recognise these two contrasting theological and missional positions, as they have dominated our churches in the West for the past century.
They lean towards different forms of mission and worship.
And each can find solid biblical backing.
But there is a fundamental problem with both worldviews – neither takes seriously what the Biblical actually teaches about Jesus, in particular what happened to Jesus after he rose from the dead. Neither offers a Biblical answer to the question – where is Jesus, now?

For this we must go back to scripture. Let's start with Luke. The event of the ascension of Jesus is so important to Luke that he tells it twice – once at the end of his gospel and once at the start of the Acts of the Apostles. We heard it again this morning. Liberals dismiss the story as mythological. Evangelicals overspiritualise it. What Luke claims, outrageously, is that the resurrected body of Jesus went up and disappeared into the clouds.
Luke tells it quite matter of fact. One minute they were standing on the hillside, the next minute Jesus was off the ground and rising, and then, just gone. And then the men in white, angels I guess, explaining that he would return again.
It is truly an extraordinary thing. What do you make of it?

It became a central component of Christian belief. In a moment we will say together the Apostles Creed, which states:

The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Needless to say, liberal statements of faith do not include this - they skip directly from the resurrection to the Holy Spirit.
But why is the ascension vital for Christian mission, and where did evangelicalism get it wrong?

Let's be clear what the word 'ascended' means. What I used to think it meant was that Jesus de-materialised. Like, it was a step by step stage process … he had a normal human body, then he had a dead body, then he had a resurrected body which was a unique mix of here and not-here, and then he had a spiritual body, and then his spiritual body exploded outward throughout the universe.
So where is Jesus now? Alive in me, in you, in our hearts, through his Spirit.
Which is all well and good except it is not what the Bible says.
The Bible says, very clearly, often repeated, that Jesus died and then was raised, resurrected, gaining a resurrection body. And that resurrected body was raised directly

into the heavenly realm which it continues to be a resurrected body. Jesus is still alive in his resurrected body, in heaven, actually tangibly alive, still a human and still God. He did not lose his humanity when he ascended into heaven, but he carried his humanity all the way to the throne of glory.
I don't remember being taught this in the church. Contemporary theologians, lead by NT Wright, have dragged what was an obscure transition into central focus, claiming that Biblical Christian faith must believe in a Jesus who is still actually alive and ruling in the spiritual dimension, as well as actually present to us in very real ways, through his Spirit, with us in every moment and especially in special moments such as worship and holy communion. It has to be both-and. We just can't have one without the other or we are lost. Jesus Christ is not a disembodied distant deity and not a symbolic value. Jesus Christ is Lord of all, of everything, the immanent and the transcendent..

Evangelicalism has forgotten that Jesus is still embodied, even while ascended. And forgotten that we also will one day be resurrected, given resurrection bodies, and not in the clouds but here on a new earth, a resurrected Earth, in which all things, all things, will live for God's glory. Our ultimate destiny is not heaven, but a new earth fully integrated with heaven.

Friends, today we celebrate the life of our church, here in Paremata, Mana, Plimmerton, Whitby, the places we live and serve, this community of Jesus followers who call ourselves St Barnabas. It is our AGM today. And this is a good moment to pause and remind ourselves about our 'why'. What are we here for? Why do we do what we do?

A theology of the ascension forces us to see more clearly the person we follow, the one in whose name we gather. Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen and ascended one, who will come again to judge and restore. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, he who is both man and God, beyond anything we can imagine in our mind's eye. Our mission begins in worship. We can simply adore. In the little glimpses we get of his glory we can only offer our praise. We lift up our hearts, humbly. We come with empty hands.

This project we call church is not really ours. It is his, all his. For him to use our hands to do his work is our greatest honour and privilege. But it is not our responsibility, not really, it's all his. We can be tired, we can stuff up, we can rest and step aside. It's not on us. And yet, when we know this Jesus, what else could we do that's worth doing but to serve him with everything we have? My prayer for St Barnabas is that in this year ahead we will each of us know him more. See him more, in his glory and brilliance and also in his gentle tenderness. And partner with him more, with these bodies of ours, which we contine to share with him, in this earth of ours which he treasures, in loving one another, in the surprises and new relationships he is bringing our way.

These hands of ours are not his only hands – he has his own. But these hands of ours are precious to Christ, whether empty or full, whether working or resting, they are dedicated to God. Yours and mine, are holy hands. Amen.