

CHRIST IN GLORY

The Ascension of Jesus

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EASTER, ASCENSION and Pentecost—these are three continuous ‘moments’ in the one great mystery of salvation in Christ. The Church’s liturgical ‘stretching out’ of these great biblical events allows for our extended pondering of the wealth of the mystery.

The feast of the Lord’s Ascension dates from the early fourth century. As a liturgical event, it emphasizes the conclusion of Easter and the beginning of a new era, the ‘end times’, in which the Holy Spirit will be at work in the Church and the world until Christ’s glorious return, his *parousia*, on the last day. In ‘expanding’ the mystery in this way, the Church situates Christ’s victory over the powers of ‘death’ in historical time.

Biblical Background to Jesus’ Ascension

Celebration of the Ascension of Jesus recalls memories of the accounts of the ascension of the prophets Elijah¹ and Enoch.² Psalm 47 has inspired the Church’s hymnology for Ascension tide:

All peoples clap your hands,
shout your joy to God,
For God most high is awesome,
great king over all the earth.

God ascends the mountain
amid cheers and trumpet blasts.
Sing out your praise to God...

For God rules the earth;
Sing praise with all your skill.
God rules over the nations
high on the sacred throne...

All the powers on earth
Belong to God most high.

New Testament passages written with post-resurrection faith and well after the Ascension and Pentecost, frequently drew upon the figure of the ‘Son of Man’ (*i.e.* a human being) found in the Book of Daniel in order to establish that the ministry of Jesus revealed his divine origins and power.³

I saw one like a human being coming with
the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One and was
presented before him.

To him was given dominion and glory and
kingship,
that all peoples and nations and languages
should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that
shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one that shall never be
destroyed.

New Testament passages that speak of the risen Jesus as ‘sitting at God’s right hand’ presuppose the Ascension. Among these references we would include, for example, Jesus reply to the taunts of the High Priest: ‘From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven’ (Matt. 26:64); also included would be the Pauline teaching concerning the immeasurable power of God in Christ as cosmic Lord: ‘God put this power into Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places...’ (Eph. 1: 20-23); and the apostolic profession that, as the Christ, ‘He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed throughout the world [and], taken up into glory’. (1 Tim 3:16).⁴

The Gospel of John interprets Christ’s ascension as an Easter event, although it is ap-

preciated as being distinct from his resurrection with regard to its significance for salvation. The first Easter appearance of the risen Jesus is to Mary Magdalene who, on discovering the presence of the Lord, made as if to embrace him. However, Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me for I am not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (Jn. 20: 17-18).

According to the Johannine tradition, the ascension evidently occurred before the evening of Easter day when Christ appeared to the disciples, and having shown them the wounds in his hands and side, breathed upon them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (Jn. 20: 19-23). One week later, the apostle Thomas touched the wounds in the hands and side of the risen Lord and came to believe (Jn. 20:34-29).

The Ascension according to Luke

It is the typological presentation of the Lord's ascension from the Lukan accounts (Lk. 24: 50-53 and Acts 1: 6-12) that the Church has chosen for her liturgical celebration of the Ascension. The evangelist Luke is remembered as being the theologian of the life of the Church after the physical disappearance of Christ. As theologian Edward Schillebeeckx has commented:

[Luke] handles the old ascension motif out of his new theological view of the Church, and thus it undergoes a change. Henceforth the Church is not based any longer on immediate, visible intercourse with the Lord, but on the witness of the apostles upon whom the Spirit of the glorified Christ has 'come down'. It is precisely in keeping with his thematic motif that St Luke underlines the conclusion of one period and the beginning of the other.⁵

Let us consider the Lukan narrative of the ascension (Acts 1: 6-11). It would be helpful



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for readers if they were to have the text open before them as we note the method used in creating this account of the Ascension.

- **The use of spatial imagery** emphasizes how an upwards movement completes the downwards movement of the Incarnation of the Word. This ascending movement begun in humiliation ends in triumph for, as the Emmaus disciples were to realize, 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' (Lk. 24: 26). Theologically speaking, therefore, the whole span of God's saving act in the earthly history of Christ is shown as having been completed with his ascension.

- **The 'forty days'** (Acts 1: 3) sets the Ascension on the symbolic fortieth day after Easter. We recall how 'forty' indicates an intense biblical period of formation represented in the forty days and nights of Noah's flood, the forty days spent by Moses on Mount Sinai, Elijah's forty days journey to Mount Horeb, the forty years of Israel's wanderings in the desert and Jesus' forty days of trial in the desert.⁶ Thus, the Lukan setting of the Ascension allows the Christian community to appreciate how Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples over a period of forty days prepared them for his physical departure in order that the Spirit may be sent to them in a new way at Pentecost.

- **The 'overshadowing' cloud** is a powerful symbol of the divine presence and is reminiscent of the *shekinah* that enclosed Moses on Sinai, that guided the Israelites to the promised land, and rested over the Temple of Solo-

mon. The *shekinah* also appears in the Lukan account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. It will overshadow the faithful being gathered to meet the Lord at the *parousia* ⁷.

• **The mountain** represents a ‘gateway’ to the regions of God ⁸; the mountain of Ascension evokes memory of the mountain of the Transfiguration.

• **The synaxis** (gathering) of the apostles acts as a prelude to the theme of the great gathering of the Christ’s faithful at his return at the end of time.⁹

• **The two resurrection angels** (from Lk. 24:1-9) who asked then, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ Ask now, ‘Why do you stand looking up to heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’

Christological Implications of the Ascension

The metaphor of the exaltation of the risen Jesus at ‘the right hand of the Father’ denotes belief that the universal and cosmic lordship of Christ is beyond the confines of space and time; it indicates belief that Jesus’ messiahship has been claimed definitively. As it was in the early Church, so now, and indeed forever, is Christ hailed as ‘*Christus Victor*’. He is celebrated as such in the ceremonial blessing and lighting of the paschal candle at Easter: ‘Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End, *Alpha* and *Omega*. His are the times and ages. To him be glory and dominion through all ages of eternity. Amen.’

As was the custom of Christians in the early Church, Psalm 110 is prayed still when Christ’s faithful continue to celebrate his Ascension as a feast of his royal investiture:

Take the throne at my right hand,
I will make your enemies a footrest.
I will raise your sceptre over Zion and
beyond,
over all your enemies.
Your people stand behind you

on the day you take command.
You are made holy, splendid,
newborn like the dawn fresh,
like the dew...

By virtue of his Ascension, Christ is declared to be *Kyrios* (Acts 2:36). As *glorified Lord* his mission is to bestow the Holy Spirit upon humanity.¹⁰ At every Sunday liturgy, the faithful, as with one voice, proclaim Christ as Lord in the Gloria and in the Creed: ‘*I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ...* He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.’

The meaning of the Ascension ‘for us and for our Salvation’

The *Letter to the Hebrews* invites reflection on the mystery of Christ’s exaltation to an eternal priesthood.¹¹ His glorified humanity is the new Holy of Holies. With a love proved in sacrifice, Christ makes a continuous offering to God ‘for us and our salvation’; as High Priest, he is the mediator of the ‘new’ and ‘better’ covenant than the one made under the old dispensation. The sacrament of baptism incorporates the members of his Body, the Church, into Jesus’ own exalted Sonship. In a very real sense, we are already with the Father and enthroned with Christ in the ‘heavenly places’ (Eph. 2:6).

Because of the Ascension-Pentecost¹² continuum, biblical harvest imagery is used effectively to illustrate the mystery of our salvation.¹³ Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians acknowledges Christ to be the ‘First Fruits’ of a glorious harvest: ‘In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection from the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: *Christ as the first fruits, then at his command, all who belong to Christ*’ (1 Cor. 15; 20-23).

'First fruits', of course, are not the fully ripened harvest, but they do give the promise and pledge of the whole. Originally the Feast of All Saints was celebrated on the octave of Pentecost and that of All Souls on the following day. These feasts together were understood as signifying the great 'harvest festival' of the sending of the Spirit by the ascended and glorified Christ.¹⁴ Likewise, the feast of Mary's Assumption is preeminently a 'harvest' feast. Assumed into glory, Mary is a prophetic 'sign' of hope for us all. In the mystery of her Assumption the Church sees Mary as the first disciple of many to be graced with a future already opened up in Christ's Ascension.

In faith, what the Ascension means for our salvation, is that everything of humanity which we possess has, in Christ, been taken into the very life of the blessed Trinity. Harvest imagery expresses well the joyful hope that we hold for our personal destiny and the destiny of the created universe. As *Kyrios*, Christ embodies the plenitude of Christian hope. Our faith, therefore, calls us to a way of life, to a spirituality oriented to the future fulfillment of the Reign of God. As baptized-confirmed-eucharistic disciples of Christ, our mission is

to be bearers of the Spirit in the world that we know. We are 'sent forth' into the world from every Eucharist with the injunction, '*Go in peace glorifying the Lord in your lives*'.

Conclusion

During this 'Year of Grace' we have been invited to contemplate the face of Christ. We do that here and now by discovering Christ in the eyes of our brothers and sisters for, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you do¹⁵ to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you do it to me'. Heaven, however, will enable us to see God 'face to face' as we look into the human eyes of Jesus glorified and experience ourselves being gazed upon with divine love.

Finally, let us make our own the Collect prayer of the Feast of the Ascension:

Gladden us with holy joy, O almighty God and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of your Son is our exaltation, and where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

1 Sirach 48:1-11.

2 Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5.

3 Dan. 7:13-14; 'Son of Man': e.g. Mtt. 9:4-8; Mk.2:10; Lk. 22:22; Jn. 1:51.

4 See also Jn. 3:12-13; Heb. Chs 8-10; Rev. 3:21; 11:12; 12:15.

5 E. Schillebeeckx, 'Ascension and Pentecost' in *Worship* Vol XXXV: 6, May 1961, 336-363.

6 Gen. 7:1-8:12; Ex. 24:15-18; Deut. 2; 1 Kg. 19:1-15; Lk. 4:1-14.

7 Ex. 13:21 ff; 19:16ff; 1 Kg. 8:10ff; Dan.7:13; Lk. 9:3; I Thess. 4:17.

8 O.T examples: Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22: 1-14), Mt Horeb (1 Kg. 5: 2-70); Mt Nebo (Deut. 34:1). N.T. examples: Mount of the Beatitudes (Mtt. 5:1-11); Transfiguration, Mt. Tabor (Lk. 9: 28-36); Mt. Olivet (Mtt. 26:36-46), Mt. Calvary (Mtt. 27:33).

9. Rev. 14: 1-5; 19:1-9. Traditional iconography includes an *Ecclesia*-Mary in the midst of the apostles.

10 The Greek title, *Kyrios*, is retained in The Church of the West in the prayer, *Kyrie eleison* (*O Lord have mercy*).

11 Heb. 4:14 -5:1-19; Chs. 7- 9 inclusive.

12 Celebration of Pentecost fifty days after Easter corresponds to the Jewish harvest Feast of Tabernacles, fifty days after the Feast of Passover.

13 Ps 126:5; Mtt.13:24-30; Jn. 4:31-38;

14 The dates were changed during the Middle Ages so as to 'close' the Pentecost cycle before Advent.

15 *i.e.* Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked and visit the sick and those imprisoned. See Mtt, 25:34-41.