

The Ascension of the Lord – Year A

The feast of the Ascension is a commemoration of Christ's exaltation following his resurrection from the dead. The language in the Hebrew tradition that gives expression to this idea is 'seated at the right hand of God.' Of course, God being a pure spirit has no right hand and does not occupy space so does not sit on a throne as if in a heavenly royal court. The expression, therefore, has to be understood as a metaphor. Its meaning is that Jesus is with God in the state of eternal happiness and glory that we usually describe as heaven.

The theological or spiritual meaning of the ascension is far more important to Luke than the actual event he describes. In the thinking of the day heaven was a realm up in the sky so it is logical that Jesus should have been lifted up to the sky. With a better knowledge of the universe we know that one does not go up in the air until one reaches a place called heaven. Theologically Jesus had to enter into his divine realm and the ascension was the event that marked this entry. In Luke's theology, the Ascension marked the end of Christ's life on earth and the beginning of the age of the Spirit who would now come to inspire and guide the fledgling Christian community. Jesus' mission has come to an end and the period of the apostles' mission to the wider world has begun.

The first reading of today's feast contains the opening verses of Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. When Luke began his gospel he also addressed Theophilus, who might have been the person who commissioned Luke to write his Gospel and Acts. In fact, we do not know who Theophilus is. Luke alludes to his Gospel as 'my earlier work' in which he had written about the mission of Jesus, and his second volume deals with the mission of the apostles in taking the gospel beyond Jerusalem to the wider world.

Luke relays the tradition that Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection for a period of time. The evangelist mentions the rather symbolic period of 40 days which, in the tradition of the rabbis, is the time it takes for a disciple to learn and repeat the master's teaching. In this case the disciples have heard the last of their master's teaching and are ready to launch out on their own. To bring this time of appearances to an end Luke describes the ascension, which clearly indicates that Jesus is no longer with his disciples but has returned to the Father. The ascension serves as a cut-off event that leaves the disciples on their own to continue the work of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, but with the assurance that the Spirit of Christ is always with them.

The last word from this reading is the instruction from the two men in white. We notice that writers of this period used the convention of having visionary or supernatural characters appear to inform or instruct the actors in a narrative to undertake a task. In this case the men are telling the disciples to get on with the job of mission, to stop gazing up at the clouds and carry out the work Jesus had started. This, of course, is the work of transforming lives by showing people how to follow the way of Jesus Christ that leads to ultimate fulfilment in the world or reign of God.

The responsorial psalm is a song in praise of God the creator and designer of the universe. This is a liturgical song of anticipation of the coming of the reign of God. The notion of the kingdom of God goes back to the days of ancient Israel when there was a dream that one day all nations would come to appreciate God as creator and loving sovereign. In those hoped-for days only good would prevail in human society and evil would be no more. Jews of the distant past believed that the messiah would come to inaugurate the reign of God and establish a world of goodness and peace. This psalm would certainly have been sung by the first Christians who fervently hoped to be delivered from the oppression of hostile regimes.

The second reading from the letter to the Christians of Ephesus raises the same theological issues. The writer prays that the Ephesians might receive full understanding of the gift of being called to partake in the salvation that has been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He acknowledges that Jesus had been given dominion over the earth as saviour of all humankind. There is a prophecy in the book of Daniel (7:13) that describes a vision the prophet had of God giving his anointed agent dominion over the whole earth. Christians have always regarded Jesus as the specially anointed one who fulfils this prophecy and who is given dominion over the earth by God.

We are all members of the body of Christ

Another metaphor that attempts to express the connection between the Christian communities and the risen Christ describes the collective followers of the Lord as the body of Christ. Paul expands on this metaphor in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch 12) where he explains that we are all parts of the body of Christ, all performing different functions but all having a uniqueness that is essential to the health of the body.

The gospel reading is from the end of Matthew's gospel where Jesus commissions his disciples to take the good news out to others and invite them to be part of the community that is the body of Christ. This injunction of Jesus is not solely referring to missionary activity. We all have a responsibility to be Christ wherever we are. We can bring people to Christ simply by being committed to our faith in Christ and living the life of the spirit, as St Paul puts it. The English author Charles Kingsley hit the nail on the head when he wrote, 'Nothing is so infectious as example.' Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote these words of encouragement, 'Let us preach without preaching, not by words but by example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do.'

One of the comforting paradoxes of the feast of the Ascension is that Jesus had left the company of his friends but in reality, was still with them. Jesus assured his disciples (Matthew 28:20) that he would be with them right to the end of time and in the early church the Christians took seriously the words of Jesus that where two or three of them were gathered in his name he was there in the midst of them.

We have been on the receiving end of the greatest love

The disciples of Jesus must have felt depressed at the departure of their master. After all, he had shared life with them during his teaching ministry. He had eaten and drunk with them, experienced all the changes of weather with them, walked many a mile and slept under the stars with them. He was one of them in every way. The disciples had committed themselves to him and they were his preferred company. 'I call you friends,' he said. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13). These same disciples, we know, went on to spend the last drop of their heart's blood for their Lord, just as he had done for them. The words of Jesus assure us that we, too, are his preferred company, we, too, are his friends, we, too, have been on the receiving end of the greatest love.

The author of the *Imitation of Christ* encourages us with the words: 'Let it be our chief study to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ.' A careful reading of one of the gospels is a good place to start in the process of getting to know Jesus. We can experience the presence of Christ when we read the Scriptures and be uplifted by his words and example.



Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing. Albert Schweitzer

We must be the change we wish to see in the world. Mohandas Gandhi



Curious Book Titles

Time for School by R.U. Upjohn
Target Shooting by Mr Completely
The Highwayman by Ann Dover
Quick Snacks by T.N. Biskits
Off to Market by Tobias A. Pigg
Exotic Irish Plants by Phil O'Dendron

Make Your Own Sweets by Oliver Nutherwun
Banbury Cross by Rhoda Whitehorse
Hole in my Bucket by Lee King
No Way Out by Isadora Neggsitt
Holdup at Gunpoint by Robin Banks
House Construction by Bill Jerome Holme

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