



Ascension Day 2010

The Ascension of the Lord has become something of a Cinderella feast of the Church. It used to be celebrated on the Thursday of the sixth week of Easter, being the fortieth day after the resurrection. Now, because people don't seem to turn out for it in England and Wales, it has been transferred to the following Sunday. It lies uncomfortably between Easter, seven weeks before, and Pentecost, one week after. Easter we understand: it may be a mighty mystery, beyond our feeble human understanding, but its essence is simple: the Grave has been defeated and Christ has triumphed over death. Pentecost is comparatively simple: we celebrate the coming of the Spirit and the birth of Church. But Ascension day, what is that all about.

On one level, it is simple enough: it is the return of the Lord to heaven. Perhaps it has a greater appeal to a child's imagination, where heaven is 'up there' and the Lord ascends, rocket like, to the skies.

But if we were to leave it like that, we would lose the richness of the feast.

First, it is the completion of the Lord's work and its crowning. He has done his Father's will. His life of thirty three years, his public ministry, his preaching, teaching, sign-giving and miracle working, is followed by his passion and death. Crowned with thorns then, he is crowned with glory now and, as the letter to the Hebrews says, he lives to make intercession for us at the right hand of God, his enemies having been put under his feet.

In the Temple at Jerusalem the High Priest went up into the Holy of Holies once a year, on the Day of Atonement, carrying the blood of sacrificed animals. Through him Israel asked forgiveness of the Lord and a renewal of the covenant. The only other person allowed to enter the Holy of Holies was a new King, on the day he was enthroned. The psalms and other texts of scripture speak about the king going up to a place of honour in the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.

This is important background for understanding the Ascension of Jesus. He is our high priest who enters the Holy of Holies, not the earthly one in Jerusalem, but the great and perfect one in heaven. The blood he carries is not that of animals but his own blood, which is offered once and for all to gain 'an eternal redemption' (Hebrews 9:12). Seated at the right hand of the Father, enthroned as judge of all, Jesus is our king and our high priest.

But it would be a mistake to think that the Ascension is only some kind of grand exit, like the finale to a great show, a sort of curtain call when the actor takes his leave and returns to the dressing room, leaving us to make our way home. There is more to it than that. You see, when the Lord returned to heavenly glory, he took his human nature with him. The Ascended Jesus who looks to us from heaven has a human face. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he took us with him. Human nature, perfect and transformed in him, has taken been taken somewhere it couldn't previously go. Paradise lost is now Paradise regained. In other words, Jesus has promised heaven to all those who believe.

But he hasn't abandoned us, left us to flounder and get on with life until the end of our earthly pilgrimage. This is not the end: it is the beginning. Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the establishment of the Kingdom, in fulfilment of Daniel's vision: 'To him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him...his dominion...shall not pass away.' And as the Apostles were given the task of proclaiming the Kingdom, so we, too, are called to carry on that work in ways great and small, whether it is preaching the Gospel, or living our lives in ways that show that we are Christians with one foot in this world, one in the Kingdom of God.

We enter now a time of waiting for the Spirit, whose coming we will be celebrating next Sunday. Let us use this week to pray that his Spirit will be active in us, stirring us to new commitment, new energy, new zeal for the Gospel, enabling us to put aside the sometime corrosive conflicts that arise because of which continent or island we come from. Where there is the Spirit, there is unity and peace. May that Spirit fall afresh, and mightily so, next week, on us all.