

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15-22
Luke 24:44-53

...he ascended into heaven...

Slow motion replay photography gives us the ability to stretch out into seconds or minutes something, which happened in an instant. By this means we can analyse in detail such things as the movements of a dancer, the fights on a football field, or the progress of an accident. The way the Church has constructed the liturgical cycle of the year around Easter, Ascension and Pentecost can lead us to think of it as a sort of historical process, but what we are really engaged in is more like a slow motion action replay. Stretching it out over fifty days gives us the opportunity to disentangle different steps and movements and reflect on them one by one. Thus we come to a deeper appreciation of each facet. But occasionally it is useful to return the film to normal speed and remind ourselves that our way of celebrating has changed our way of seeing because what we are focussed on in the days between Easter and Pentecost should be seen as a whole.

When it comes to the Ascension, which is based on the timing given in Acts, not the Gospels or Paul, it is not differences in timing that need concern us. What matters is the meaning to which the writers point us when they refer to the Ascension.

Jesus is Lord. Recently someone I was talking to had difficulties with what it meant to say Jesus is Lord. There was the problem of the maleness of the language as well as its monarchical flavour. What it means of course is that Jesus belongs with the source of all life. Ascension means he has been raised - promoted - to the highest level in the cosmos to encompass all reality. That is what it means to say he sits in the right hand of the Father and has all things under his feet. At Easter I said the resurrection means Jesus is "unconfined". Ascension witnesses to this in the most complete sense. It tells us that Jesus is completely liberated from all restrictions of time and space and has universal authority because he is with God. And the good news he is with God "for us". During his earthly life Jesus could only be in one place at a time. Now, seated at the right hand of the Father, he is available to all in the power of the Spirit. That is what we affirm in the Creed. From now on he is a means of grace, an intercessor, by which God remains committed to us, and goes on speaking in the world so that the mission continues. And from now on he becomes our advocate with God, the one who represents us to God just as we represent God to the world.

In the Ascension our humanity is glorified. During his ministry Jesus did not cease to be divine in the human place, and now he does not cease to be human in the divine place. He has "gone up" to be the empowerment of the church. This is good news for us because, God has been among us as one of us to bring us life and hope, and now one of us is taken to share everything with God. He takes with him all to whom he is joined in Spirit. They have already entered in to the Holy place. This does not mean they leave the world. Instead, through the power of the Spirit they become the living expression of his life, showing forth in the present the hope and promise he has given. The

glorification and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth signifies God's ultimate will to perfect and renew human nature beginning with Christ and all who are in him. This is God's "yes" to us at the deepest level. Political and educational systems argue for human dignity to be maintained on many different bases, but in the church we argue for human rights and dignity on the basis that God has chosen to enter fully into life with us, and take one of us into the Godhead. This demonstrates what we are worth in the eyes of God. This gives us a new respect for our humanity and gives substance to our mission of serving our sisters and brothers in the world.

Why stand gazing up to heaven? As our graphic today indicates, our mission is not to stand gazing up into heaven. The one we seek has gone but through him we have been given what we need to know of God in order to undertake our pilgrimage through the world. At Easter we reflected on the image in John's Gospel where, when Jesus was raised, there were two angels in white to mark the empty space. Once again we are reminded by two figures in white that Jesus is not the possession of the Christian people. The space marked by two on Easter day was not filled with a dead person, or a memory but an absent presence. The paradox of faith is that the one who died and lives to God cannot be restricted to our normal ways of understanding. And we do not stand gazing into heaven because our loss of Jesus is the moment when we consciously begin to wait. There is a lot in this word. In the waiting time we prepare to engage in a world focused mission based on the vision of life that he gave us. But most of all, waiting means we do not move in our own strength, or by our own inspiration. We wait until the power of the Spirit moves us. Waiting means relying on God for the strength to get on with the job. It is no accident that Ordinary Time, as the Sundays after Pentecost are called, is the time when our Lectionary leads us to reflect on the mission of the church.

Ascension is about a transition, and the transition is similar to one we all go through during times of change, whether as a result of growth or loss. We know how after we lose someone we love for a while the presence of the person stays with us in the pain of the loss. We look for them, listen for them, and speak to them as if they were here in the flesh but gradually this changes. A similar process happens when we make the transition from something familiar to something new, as in the change jobs or change of houses. But there comes a time when gently we find ourselves getting on with the new life. We know we have separated from the old life and yet some sense of connection remains. Often there is a distinct moment or a stage when we reaffirm life and find new energy for the way ahead.

Ascension does mark a transition but it is one, which, we may enter into with faith and hope, because it confirms that the creative liberty that was at work in the resurrection has not been withdrawn from us. In fact, Jesus' presence with God on our behalf assures us that this creative liberty will continue to be engaged with us. And, in the goodness of God this creative liberty has now been made available to all.