

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1-11
Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Ascended into heaven

Ascension Day was last Thursday, forty days after Easter. There follows a gap of ten days between it and the celebration of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. This space of ten days is like a little Advent. A time of deep, expectant waiting, loaded with anticipation. It is like the pregnant pause between the moment you see the aircraft landing that carries your long lost friend, and their appearance at the disembarkation door. Today we celebrate a change that has taken place, and anticipate the arrival of a new, energising power. The Paschal candle is not lit to make the point that Christ has ascended - the light of his immediate presence has been removed. But we wait in sure and certain hope that a new gift will come when, as promised, God sends the Spirit. Although resurrection and ascension belong together in the Gospel witnesses, it was one thing to assert that Jesus was no longer found among the dead, it was slightly different to proclaim that he had ascended to the right hand of God.

Ascension was a popular theme in the preaching of the ancient church, but it presents some challenges for us. The Apostles accepted the Biblical world-view of a three-tier universe in which heaven, the abode of God was spatially located above the earth and sky. The Copernican revolution brought a new understanding of the cosmos, which banished the old idea of heaven from the topography of the universe. With it went many people's ability to believe in the God of the Bible. But even though the Bible spoke of going to where God dwelt as ascending, a more nuanced understanding can be found. Witness Psalm 139 *If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there.* Despite the understanding that God dwelt in the top layer of the three-tier universe, the divine presence was not confined to that place, but was a transcendent reality, capable of being all pervasive.

This sense of pervasiveness is another way of talking about God's sovereignty and it opens the door to a different way of thinking about what it means that Jesus has ascended. From the beginning it was the Christian conviction that Jesus had not only "Gone to God" in the spatial sense, but it also meant he had been elevated **beyond** all limits of time and location. The language of ascent also carried what we might call a political reference. Jesus had been elevated to a position of sharing fully in the presence and authority of God, whose power and presence transcended the limitations of space and time. The ancient way of saying this was to state that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God. This new status of Jesus means he shares in the fullest possible way, God's sovereignty over all things in heaven on earth. This still does not answer the question of "where" heaven is, and it is difficult to answer this without speaking double Dutch. But heaven is where God is; it is just that this is not a place. We could say it is a dimension of reality from which God is present to all of creation - through Word and Spirit and Incarnation.

On Ascension Day the Church sings enthronement Psalms the mood of which look towards the fulfilment of time, the day when all evil elements shall be eliminated, and God rules supreme. After the advent of the monarchy in Israel there was a clear understanding that God was the true sovereign and, the King was God's servant. Enthronement Psalms were sung on coronation day. Imagine, as the king ascended the throne, the gathered assembly sang:

The Lord is King, with majesty enrobed Ps 93:1 or

*Clap your hands, O you people, shout to God with loud songs of joy,
For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth. Ps 47:1-2*

In the midst of the grand spectacle, the new monarch was reminded of his true status. He was a servant of God, a shepherd of God's people. The church uses these Psalms on Ascension Day because Jesus, who was a servant and shepherd of Israel, has now been elevated to share the cosmic rule of God. He is exalted above every other form of power and authority. That, in a nutshell is what it means to say, as the early church did, that Jesus is Lord.

At Princeton Seminary in the days when James McCord was the President we knew him as a nice man - a big, cigar-smoking fellow who had strong links with Texas oil Barons. There was no doubt he ran the Seminary. Princeton was a very clean place, but there was a piece of graffiti on a wall which said: JESUS IS LORD, BUT McCORD IS BOSS. It was never removed, and it made you wonder who put it there. It could be read as meaning that despite the fact that Jesus shared complete authority with God, McCord ruled as he willed. That McCord was boss made a difference in certain ways - he had the Seminary at heart, and he took a genuine interest in the students. If the graffiti had read McCORD IS BOSS, BUT JESUS IS LORD the sense would have been quite different.

In the Church the affirmation that Jesus is Lord means we look beyond all forms of human power to the one from which all power comes. That Jesus is Lord means a sentence has been passed on all forms of earthly governance. Even though tyranny and darkness and death are present realities for many, the Gospel proclaims their ultimate defeat.

The proclamation Jesus is Lord also changes the mode of power under which we operate. Those who are joined to God live in the confidence of God's victory, and become part of God's reign of **seeking love**, expressed in standing with the least in compassion, mercy and forgiveness. This mode of power revamps all forms of earthly power, and it holds a question to all those in the world who have power. It is not difficult to look around the world and see where power does not stand with the least, but exploits them, and where the barrel of a gun or a suicide bomb makes short work of compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Ascension proclaims another way that is more humble, and more hopeful.

The promise of Ascension is that the power that is in God - the same power that was at work in Jesus - will be given to the disciples. It is this power they, like us, were called to wait for with deep anticipation. The disciples were hoping for a restoration of the ideal relationships Israel enjoyed under King David. Not for them the restoration of a

monarchy. Something higher than political freedom was and is on offer. The Spirit of God was about to make itself evident in fresh ways that transformed this fearful, bewildered community, which had no power of its own, into a courageous, imaginative band, with energy out of all proportion to its size. Through their joy, and their worship, they proclaimed the world is open to new governance. In this power they went forth to break all barriers of race, religion and ethnicity, so that others could share the gift they had received: the knowledge that God has reconciled all people, in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Although the Paschal candle is not lit today, Ascension is not so much an ending as a new beginning. Jesus' going up is not the same as going away. It is the climax of the Gospel. It proclaims that in taking Jesus to himself God has declared his love for the whole world. These ten days of waiting for the Spirit anticipate a time when Jesus will be more deeply and permanently present, and we may share his energising power.

At the Ascension, the disciples were not crushed by grief and anxiety, and neither need we be. They passed their time in the Temple filled with hope and joyful expectation, praising God! And so may we, for we have good news to proclaim. God is for us. The whole world is loved in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit's power it has been made possible for us to become part of his living body. Alleluia!