

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1 - 11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15 - 23

Luke 24:44 – 53

Don't just stand there!

The celebration of Ascension is a great challenge to modern ways of thinking. Was Jesus the first astronaut? If so how did he survive the journey through space? If he managed to travel at the speed of light, how long did it take him to reach his destination? And where was his destination? Although the Ascension is spoken of in numerous places in the New Testament usually no distinction is made between the departure of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, which as we have seen in our recent readings from John occurs at Easter. Luke is the only Evangelist to describe the event and then he makes it complicated for modern readers by giving us two versions of it. In the Gospel Jesus ascends at Easter and tells the disciples to wait for the gift of the Spirit. In Acts, Jesus is with the disciples for 40 days, before he ascends, still calling on them to wait for the gift of the Spirit. Compared with John, Luke gives us something like a slow motion action replay of the events.

Some years ago the New Testament Scholar Ernst Kasemann felt that the different timing of the Ascension in Acts resulted from the Evangelist Luke taking a more relaxed approach to the imminent return of Christ. Luke no longer expected the world to end tomorrow, and so gave us a more measured approach to the raising and exaltation of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. While the church eventually adopted his lead in the way it constructed its liturgical year, this was not true for the first three centuries. The change to treating Ascension as a separate event from Pentecost seems to have come in the fourth century. There may be some significance in the fact that in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine came to power and embraced the Christian faith. It is speculative but could it be that, faced with having a Christian Emperor, the church felt it was all the more important to find a way to celebrate, in a very pointed way, Jesus' exaltation to share the authority of God. And that is what Ascension is about, Jesus' exaltation to share the authority of God. It is about God's victory and empowerment demonstrated in Jesus who was crucified, rather than intergalactic space travel.

When seeking to put flesh on the celebration of the Ascension, the church drew heavily on imagery drawn from the enthronement rituals for kings. This is not surprising, as in the ancient world there was often nothing higher than the king, and he was frequently treated like a god. At Ascension we affirm that Jesus "sits at God's right hand" - the place reserved for the person who was nearest to and shared the authority of the sovereign. But here the sovereign is the living God, the life giver. And Jesus is raised to inherit the first place in all of God's sovereignty. This is good news for us. This man, who shared our common life and history, our joys our sufferings and our death, now shares everything with the one who rules over all: the one who gives life, and has the power to conquer death. That is what we are confessing when we say those words from the Creed - **he ascended into heaven and**

is seated at the right hand of the Father - Jesus shares, and continues to enjoy the fully power and authority of God, as demonstrated in the resurrection. And we are promised a share in his empowerment.

Talking about the sovereignty of God is not easy: these are difficult things to grasp. In the text we see how people at the time had their own ideas of nationalism and kingship all mixed up with what Jesus was telling them. And they also did not understand the talk about when these things would occur. They had to be reminded, as people still do, that the times are not in our hands, any more than God's gift of power is ours to control. But there is hope.

The graphic on the Order of Service is traditional, but one thing the marks on the feet tell us is that Jesus who is lifted up to God, is the Jesus who suffered for us and with us. He whom Pilate and Caiaphas sought to entomb was made to suffer at the hands of all the powers we know. But his raising revealed that his humility and submission were not signs of having been conquered. Instead it showed that the master fact that determines most of our horizons, the power of death, had been conquered.

In the 1980s the Bishop of Durham realized that one of the things that had gone dead for people was Christian language. He made it a personal challenge to produce two short mini creeds in modern language. The first reads: "*God is. He is as he is in Jesus. So there is hope.*" [Arnold, *Life Conquers Death*, p 184].

That God is "as he is in Jesus" means that all Jesus brings and all that occurs through him, including his suffering and death, introduces a new reality to the world, especially in connection with relationships of power. Paul spoke about this in Corinthians, when he said that after Christ "the form of this world is passing away" [1 Cor: 7:31]. This is not so much the idea that the world was expected to end soon, but that all previously existing relationships of power now stood in a new relationship to us, because of the man with holes in his hands and feet and side. When the crucified one was shown as having been embraced fully by the sovereign power of God, the world as it used to run, the methods and values for determining worth and significance, was turned upside down. The sovereignty of God had set in. Suffering love became the premium value, opening up a new era of hope for the poor, the captive, the sick and the oppressed, as Jesus announced in his Sermon in the Synagogue [Luke 4:18-19] and made clear in the Sermon on the Plain [6:17 -26].

Therefore Ascension is very affirming of human life: one of us who loved us, taught us and served and died for us shares everything with God. Through him the power of God is let loose amongst us, with the promise that there will be more of this, not less, through the empowering presence of the Spirit.

"God has gone up on high..." This line from our opening hymn does not mean God has gone away from the church, but has gone up to be the empowerment of the church. The ten-day gap between Ascension and Pentecost is like a pregnant pause, but it is not a time for idle speculation. "Don't just stand there!" At the end of the Acts reading the angels reprove the disciples for gazing into heaven. "Don't just stand there!" This is not a time for longing for a departed leader, or for idle, heavenly-minded speculation. This is the time when the task of the church is to wait and pray in hope: to praise God for the gifts of grace, and to wait and strive for the

promised gift of the Spirit, the sign that God's reign is truly amongst us. The prayer of the church is *Veni Creator Spiritus*: Come Holy Spirit. This is not the prayer of some secret, self-satisfied Gnostic sect. This is the prayer of those who know that, although the world has yet to believe it, the Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our God and [his] Christ, and he will reign forever and ever. Come Holy Spirit is the prayer of those who know and trust that the life-giving power that brings life out of death is available to us through him. Come Holy Spirit is the prayer of those who don't just stand there, but joyfully and hopefully give themselves to the praise and service of God.
