

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord C - *Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?* May 29, 2022.

This Sunday, our Easter celebrations take a dramatic turn. We are reminded of the departure, his ascension. The **Ascension is a building block of the Christian faith, figuring noticeably into our worship practices for centuries.** We profess Jesus's ascension week-after-week in the words of the Nicene Creed: ***He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*** Each year, forty days after we celebrate his glorious resurrection, we celebrate—or, maybe “acknowledge” is a better word—our Lord being taken up into the clouds.

Though the Ascension is a mainstay of the Christian faith, it often plays at least second fiddle to other feast days. The description of the Ascension in the bible is beautiful but we also feel a loss. Just as we have gotten accustomed to having Jesus around again, he is taken away from us. Gone are those revelatory post-resurrection breakfasts on the beach with Jesus preparing chargrilled fish for his friends and the profound teaching moments on the road to Emmaus as Jesus is known afresh in the breaking of the bread. Even Thomas' exclamation, “My Lord and my God,” has seemingly faded into oblivion. It can easily feel like the Ascension has silenced all the fanfare and excitement that the Resurrection enacted just forty days earlier, as the Lord is seized to some mystical, faraway place.

In this Sunday's liturgy we have two readings from Luke, the conclusion of his gospel (24:46-53), and the opening passage of the Acts of the Apostles (1:1-11). Comparing them can give us an insight into how Luke tells the story of the origins of our faith. In the concluding passage of the gospel, Jesus, on the evening of his resurrection day, ‘withdraws’ from the eleven and their fellow disciples, and ‘is carried up to heaven’. John's gospel paints a similar picture – the Risen Lord, we recall, tells Mary Magdalene on the morning of his resurrection, ***Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father***. In fact, we do not find in any of the gospels – Luke's included – the sequence in Acts with which we are so familiar: Resurrection; Ascension (after 40 days); Pentecost (after 50 days). Skillful teacher that he is, Luke wants, in these two accounts, to spell out for his readers different aspects of the Saviour's Paschal Mystery. **The gospel is the story of the Saviour. Luke's second volume, Acts of the Apostles is the story of the Church's beginnings.** So Luke tells this second story in a way that emphasizes the sure foundations of the Church's faith – what the disciples learned from the Risen Lord, who ***for forty days, continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God***. As we have seen in the past weeks, all the gospels imply this learning process, making reference to the initial doubts and hesitations of the disciples in their encounters with Christ after his resurrection. Of course, Luke may have his own factual basis for his account – there was certainly a large influx of pilgrims to Jerusalem on the feast of Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover; on the other hand, as we know, 40 is used by biblical writers, as a round number. Through the gift of the Christ's own Spirit at Pentecost this foundation laid by the Saviour will shape the Church's mission: ***‘not many days from now you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’***. **Luke, in Acts, tells the story of the early Church as the work of the Holy Spirit.**

Luke's presentation of the Ascension brings out something else of great moment in the life of the pilgrim Church. ‘I am going away’, Jesus had said to the disciples more than once. Gone to the right hand of the Father he will be present in a new and more intimate way: ‘I am with you always; yes, to the end of time’ (Matthew 28). In one of his homilies Pope Leo the Great wrote: ***‘The visible presence of our Redeemer passed over into the sacraments. For, in a mysterious way, once he had returned to the glory of his Father's majesty, the Son of Man began to be more present’***. The Ascension is the establishment of his Kingship and his Kingdom on absolutely unshakable ground. Earthly kings and emperors always remain vulnerable; if their enemies don't usurp them, death surely will. But Christ's reign will never come to an end. He is no

longer vulnerable. Because he has ascended into heaven, his Kingdom is firm; his Church will never be destroyed.

Witnessing Jesus ascent gives the disciples (and us) a glimpse of the destiny that awaits them (and us). As those today in relationship with the risen Christ, the Ascension affords us the fulfilled promise of our very selves being lifted up at the last, where we will dwell in and with God in a gloriously new way. Jesus went back to God to prepare our place up there. This is, in no small part, the beautiful promise of Jesus 'ascension. As Jesus is lifted up, the disciples are standing alongside one another—they are not alone. In their wonder and amazement and confusion, the disciples are together, as they begin to cope with Jesus 'absence, as they learn to live into this new, startling way of love. In the wake of Jesus 'absence, the disciples experience something unexpected. With their faces turned to the sky, the disciples see Jesus raise his hand in blessing, as the Gospel of Luke tells us. That, as he is lifted up, the reach of Jesus 'blessing broadens, widening in scope from the disciples, to Jerusalem, and eventually, to all corners of the earth. It is a stunning image that majestically depicts the ever-growing expansiveness of love, covering "all that is" so that God might fill all things, even as God is above all things, to paraphrase the second reading St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (1:17-23). ***God made Christ the everlasting King, "raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named"***

Whether the disciples realize it or not, they begin to live into this blessing by turning their gaze away from the heavens and beginning to look around at one another. In Luke's account, those gathered join together in worship. Following the Ascension, the book of Acts tells us, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, to that secret room they had occupied, in order to devote themselves to prayer. Peter, James, and John; Andrew, Philip, and Thomas; Bartholomew, Matthew, and James; Simon, Judas, and Mary, all come together to figure out what this blessing might mean in their context and in light of Jesus 'example and teaching.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has not gone up, up, and away, but rather more deeply into our world. He has gone to a dimension that transcends but impinges upon our universe. Aside from the momentary loss, Ascension described the disciples, a worshipful and prayerful people, coming to realize the breadth and depth of God's saving love. Beyond looking up at the sky to witness humanity's fate played out in real time, the Ascension, in a very concrete sense, puts into motion the beginnings of the Church: a group of fitful and faithful folks working together in the absence of the One who brought them together in the first place. It has become commonplace to celebrate the Church's birthday on the Feast of Pentecost, as that special and unique occasion of the Holy Spirit's dramatic empowering of God's people from every tribe and tongue. But maybe this birthday is being celebrated nine days too late. ***For here, in the wake of Jesus 'ascension, we glimpse those first disciples worshiping, praying, and no doubt, seeking what the Lord would have them to do in community with one another. As those gathered together in Jesus's name, might we receive the mystery and richness of the Ascension. Like the passing of the torch, Jesus pass onto the disciples who pass all through the centuries onto us to carry on Jesus' mission by what we are rather than what we say. Let the love of God burn our hearts so people will see from our joy that life is good, has a purpose and is worth living.*** Let us preach the values of Christ in our neighbourhood by our good example. The Ascension reveals the work we must do in order to be with Christ forever. ***We must be witness to the Lord by taking up our cross and follow Christ's footsteps in the building up of the Church.*** Let's pray, as St Paul did in the Second Reading, that the: ***"eyes of our hearts be enlightened, that we may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory... and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe"***. Amen.