

The Ascension

* Second “second reading”

Cycle C - Ascension Sunday – 2022

There is a story of a young boy who came home from Sunday School
and started drawing a picture of Jesus ascending into heaven.
He had Jesus blasting off into the sky inside a rocket which had NASA written down the side.
As he handed the picture to his mom,
He accompanied it with all the sound effects of a rocket blasting off.
The mother was a little surprised
and asked if this was the same story that your teacher told you at Sunday school.
The boy was a little bashful and said, no...but added... the story she told---you would not believe.

For most of us, the story of the Ascension is about how Jesus got to heaven.
Rather it is a story about the disciples understanding
of what it means that Jesus is no longer physically present.
For some it is a crises of faith,
for others it is a sign of things to come.
John and Paul don't even mention it.
Matthew and Mark have it happen on the day of resurrection.
Only Luke has it 40 days after the resurrection.
The one thing all the evangelists agree on is where in heaven Jesus went, and where he is presently
at God the Father's right hand.
In almost every culture being at someone's right hand is not just about physical location.
It is an indication that the one who sits at the right hand,
shares in the power of the one on the throne.

Now that is all well and good, but Jesus goes one step further.
Jesus taught us that where he is, we will also be.
He taught us that he is going to prepare a place for us,
and that through him we will have the fullness of life.
That one day, we too, will sit at the right hand of the father.
But let me be clear—although we have received an invitation to sit at the right hand,
there is nothing we have done to warrant this gift. It is a gift that is freely given.
The challenge is to accept it. To live a life worthy of this invitation.

I mention this last point because we need to remember that the Ascension
is not to be seen in its own light.
The Church has given us 40 days between Easter,
and then another 10 days to Pentecost and the sending of the Holy Spirit.
The Church expands this time
so that we can examine the different aspects of the Paschal mystery.
But properly speaking the Paschal Mystery is all one and the same event.
This becomes very clear in John's gospel
where Jesus appears to his disciples on the day he rises from the dead,
and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit.
We need 50 days to examine each individual aspect of the mystery,
because for most people we cannot balance the whole story of salvation in our tiny heads.

Remember the story of Mary Magdeleine in the garden.

Initially she thought Jesus to be the gardener,

and when she realized it was him, he said to her, "Don't cling to me."

Which we interpret to mean, don't cling to the way things were in the past.

Things have changed.

In other words, Jesus is no longer physically present,

rather he has ascended to the Father,

and through the Holy Spirit,

he is spiritually present to all people in all times.

Luke stresses that just prior to his ascending Jesus lifted his hands.

This is reminiscent of Moses fighting the Amalekites,

when his hands were raised the Israelites had the advantage...

in other words the Israelites were blessed

and prevailed in the battle.

In the same way, when Jesus raised his hands,

the Christian community was blessed,

and continues to be blessed.

Fast forward 2000 years, we are still basking in this same blessing.

The problem is we want the easy way.

We want what happened to the disciples at Pentecost to happen to us.

We want the Holy Spirit to descend upon us like tongues of fire.

We want Jesus Christ to open up our minds to understand the scriptures.

In the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, which is also Luke's work...

when Jesus ascended,

the disciples were staring into the sky.

They wanted Jesus to come back and finish what he started.

They did not understand that they were to finish what he started.

Only when the two men in white asked them, "Why are you standing here looking into the sky?"

In other words, "Don't stand around all day waiting for Jesus to do everything."

If we want to open our minds to understand the scriptures, we need to read the scriptures.

If we want to alleviate poverty in our world,

we have to get off our butts and do something.

If we want the sick to be visited, and comforted...we have to go to the hospitals.

In other words, we need to do something.

We can't be standing around waiting for Jesus to do everything.

It was St. Augustine who said,

"Pray as though everything depended on God,
work as if everything depended on you.

Many scholars see the ascension as a sort of hinge.

The gospel of Luke is all about the life of Jesus--his gospel ends with the Ascension.

The Acts of the Apostles begins with the Ascension

and follows the growth of the Church to the ends of the earth.

The Ascension is the hinge...from the life and times of Jesus Christ,

to the life and times of the Church.

The interesting thing is that the life of the Church has not ended.

The gospel is still spreading.

There are still many who have not heard the good news,

and until all people have heard, and heeded the Good News,

we cannot let up.

If the Ascension has taught us anything,

it has taught us that we, the Christian Community, make up, the new body of Christ.

And as long as one part of the body is suffering...we all suffer.

I find it fascinating that the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Why joy, and not sorrow that Jesus is gone?

You see, they had come to believe that Jesus was alive and had been glorified by the Father.

They had seen the glory of the Father, the goodness of God—w

ho makes our deepest dreams come true in the most surprising of ways.

He makes all things turn out, for those who place their trust in him.

Which means that for a time

it might seem that the world is going to hell in a handbasket...

but the reality is God always wins.

This is Good News. This is the Good News.

Let us live, not looking up to heaven waiting for Jesus to do everything.

Let us live our lives--so that all people will come to know Christ.