

Ascension A 2020 (May 21) (Devotion)

Greeting brothers and sisters in Christ. I'm Pastor Curtis Aguirre of our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Penticton, British Columbia and this is a devotion for the Feast of the Ascension.

Let's begin with a prayer...

Almighty God, your only Son was taken into the heavens and in your presence intercedes for us. Receive us and our prayers for all the world, and in the end bring everything into your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday, so unless you replace the normal Sunday readings and focus for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, most people miss it. It just flits by, unobserved and without further comment or teaching. I will admit that I have not been good about lifting Ascension Day either. But as the proclamation is coming to you via video, I thought it would be good to make this video to look at The Ascension and its significance for us.

The Ascension is described primarily in Luke's Gospel (24:44-53) and the beginning of Acts (1:1-11), which was also written by Luke. There is also a one-sentence mention of it at the end of Mark's Gospel ("long ending" 16:19). The description given in Luke goes like this:

Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the Temple blessing God.

Luke's description in Acts—the second volume of his two-volume history of Jesus and the Apostles—has a slightly different emphasis. It goes like this:

When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up,

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and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.' Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.

Luke, of course, has his literary and rhetorical interests. In his Gospel, the ascension functions as a sort of *dénouement* to the story of the life of Jesus. It is the resolution at the end of his ministry and suffering, and sets the stage for the next volume of Luke's work. By contrast, in Acts, the ascension sets the stage for the coming saga of the Apostles and the Holy Spirit working among them and through them "to the ends of the earth", so to speak.

When reading about the ascension of Jesus, we have to remember that we ask different questions of the written texts than they did 2,000 years ago. Today, our worldview and mind set is shaped by scientific materialism. The scientific and materialistic way of looking at the world leads us to a literal-historical reading of these texts. We tend to analyze the "how did this happen" part of the story. We look for physical and mechanical explanations of the nature of Jesus in his post-resurrection body and of the nature of "ascension" as in "where did he go?" and "how is that supposed to work?" and so on.

But the references to the ascension in letters of the New Testament show that very early on already, even before Luke ever wrote his Gospel or Acts, the interest in the ascension was primarily symbolic, metaphorical, and theological. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul alludes to the ascension in passing as part of his grand schema of Christ Jesus, the one who was like God, but emptied himself, thereby setting the standard and example of Christian behaviour. He writes that Christ...

...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness; and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross.

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Therefore God also highly exalted him [*that's the ascension part*] and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:7-11)

In the letter to the church in Ephesus, it says:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places [*notice that we skip right from resurrection to Christ in the place of divine authority*], far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (1:20-23)

And in the letter to the Hebrews it says, God's Son...

...is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for our sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high [*again, the same jump, this time from crucifixion to taking up divine authority*], having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (1:3-4)

In all of these and other similar passages, the event we call the Ascension is glossed over, because as an event it is not significant, but it is rather one part of the overall schema of Christ's coming into the world and returning to the realm or dominion or manner of existence we call heaven or eternity or the spiritual realm.

In later theological reflection, the Ascension functions as the piece that closes the loop of Christ's movement from cosmic Word, born into the world as the human Jesus, suffering, dying, rising, and ascending or returning to take up the place of authority and power ("the right hand of

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the Father”).

In the development of classic Christian theology, this loop is seen as the process of reconciliation between God and the estranged creation. Just as the nonmaterial God came into the created material world in the person of the Word made flesh in Jesus, so the material human Jesus is taken up into the non-material realm of the spirit. The two realities, spiritual and material, are brought together in Christ, and are taken up into each other. There is a kind of mutual infusion and embrace. The two become inextricably interwoven in the person of Christ.

In this framework, the life of Jesus becomes the concrete example of the way in which we can voluntarily and intentionally participate in the bringing together of the two worlds. As God moves toward us in self-emptying, embracing weakness and humility, so we move toward God in the same way.

The pattern set out by Christ, reconciling God and humanity, pulls us in the opposite direction of how we usually move in relation to God. Our typical human traits, such as insistence on our own way, pride (in the sense of “I’m better than...”), grabbing after things, resenting others, worry, territoriality, defensiveness, and so many other kinds of characteristics, habits, and inner movements of the soul, draw us away from God. The movement of Christ is the movement of healing us of these ills. It is the reconciling cycle of self-emptying, humility, and servanthood lived by Christ as a pattern for us.

But besides pulling us away from God, our ordinary traits also tend to pull us away from others, especially those who are different from us in some way, or who are somehow in competition with us for something, such as attention, resources, or whatever. This pulling away, pulling apart happens on the grand scale of human history and current events, but also on the little scale of the individual. It leads to wars and exploitation, and it leads to abuse and manipulation. The Christ cycle, by contrast—that movement of which the Ascension is a part—ends wars, restores dignity, preserves the integrity of the person, and moves toward transparent relationships by bringing the physical and spiritual into harmony with

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each other; by insisting that holy exaltation begins with the act of emptying oneself. "Humble yourself in the sight of the LORD, and God will lift you up." (James 4:10)

The early theologians and teachers saw Christ's way of being as the original destiny and purpose for which humans were created, but which we forgot. Although the prophets had been trying to remind us of it for many centuries, it was Christ who most fully and perfectly embodied it. Thus, the Ascension is also the missing link. While the prophets could say the words, they could not embody the full cycle of emptying and fulfilling that the Word made flesh could. The Ascension is one link in the chain that constitutes the great cycle of reconciliation and healing lived and embodied by Christ, the Word made flesh, the human made God.

We mirror Christ's movement when we surrender our humanity in order to be filled with divinity. This can sound like an anti-material way of thinking if it is taken out of context. But it's not. Rather it is part of rediscovering a healthy, balanced relationship to the material world perceived now from a divine perspective. Rather than being slaves to the world of matter, instincts, impulses, and visceral reactions, one lets go of that world in order to be able to re-embrace it with balanced appreciation. It is like the saying goes, "You have to let go of something before you can truly embrace it." The misunderstanding comes when the letting go becomes an end in itself.

In the Ascension, Christ re-embraces his divinity and authority, but now does so fully human, the embodiment of the servant. The mirror movement for us is that after having surrendered our humanity to embrace divinity, we re-embrace our humanity, but now as transformed (even transfigured) embodiments of the Divine within the material. In Christ, humanity is taken up in God, and divinity is implanted in humanity. Amen.