

Ascension Sunday
Acts 1.1-11/Ephesians 1.15-23/Luke 24.44-53
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
20 May 2007

“ELEVATED WITH CHRIST”

~Paul H. Friesen~

Last Sunday, the last Sunday after Easter, was once called Rogation Sunday. On that day, in England, processions went forth from parish churches to bid God's blessing on the crops that had been planted, in the hope that in God's mercy the harvest in the Fall would feed the village.¹

There is another old English custom particular to Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter, this past Thursday. On it priest and people 'beat the bounds of the parish'. That is the clergy and wardens took the children on a tour of the boundaries of the parish church, which matched the boundaries of the village—they stopped at each boundary stone and swatted at it with their willow branches, to signify the full extent of the church's spiritual responsibilities to the community it served.²

We might ask if our church calendar is here caught up in quaint customs—charming, even meaningful at one time, but without value in a modern city that doesn't really feel the impact of a failed harvest, or pays no attention to 'parish bounds' because of the way each of us crosses urban boundaries daily—and each of us passes other churches on our ways to worship.

Yet as we heard last Sunday there are spiritual consequences for the way in which we grow crops. And there are consequences for the way in which we see our spiritual responsibilities for our city.

And there are important consequences for an even older level of our calendar—the events in Jesus' life that are behind all our Sunday celebrations, whatever local customs prevail in England or Portugal or Russia. So this morning I would like us to think about the Ascension of Jesus, and what it should mean for us.

Amidst the paintings that cover most of the inside surfaces of one of the great churches of Europe—I can't recall which one—there is a painting of the Ascension that is itself unforgettable. It is on the inside of the dome, so as you crane your neck up higher and higher you see it—the clouds of glory and the bottom of Jesus' feet in their midst. In a way that seems almost comical today the artists tried to capture the disciples' point of view on the day our Scriptures

¹ L.W. Cowie and John Selywn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1974), p. 95.

² L.W. Cowie and John Selywn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1974), p. 96.

have just recalled for us. Is our last glance of the incarnate Lord the bottom of his feet, as he is taken up into heaven? Is it a longing, loving farewell scene?

Whatever that particular painting accomplished—and it may have been as much as today's Epistle describes—it would be easy for us today to see only a special farewell scene in the Gospel story. Is there more?

How important is it for Christians to talk about the 'Ascension' of Jesus? How much should the Ascension shape the life of the church? Are there not more important things to talk about when we gather together for worship?

The answer given by our Scriptures and passed on to us by our ancestors is that the Ascension matters—enormously. We would have forgotten Jesus in a significant way if we didn't remember the last event the Apostles recalled.

Why was—why is—the Ascension important? *The first reason is part of our larger confession that Jesus really became one of us—entered into human culture and lived out his days among us though he was, we confess, the eternal Son of God.*

When the English Church was reformed in the 16th Century and what we call 'Anglicanism' was born, our first 'Anglican' Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer captured the revised liturgy in the *Book of Common Prayer*, much of which he personally drafted.

Among the things he drafted, and translated into English for regular use was the Great Prayer, or the Litany. He drew on several sources for it, including the very old prayer attributed to John Chrysostom in the sixth century which he translated into English. You might have heard this part in modern or traditional language:

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation, Good Lord, deliver us.

By thine Agony and bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial, Good Lord, deliver us.

By thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; by thy sending of the Holy Spirit; by thy heavenly Intercession; and by the Coming again in glory, Good Lord, deliver us.³

In other words, the church confesses that there is no part of Jesus' life that is without meaning for us. It is the whole life of Jesus among us that is the means by which salvation, deliverance, new life, comes to us. And that is terribly important to us because we have to go through 'whole lives' too—we can't skip

³ As it appears in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.31

the bits we don't like. As it was put in the memorable words: 'Uh-uh! Mud! Thick oozy mud. We can't go over it. We can't go under it! Oh no! We've got to go through it!'⁴

Some forms of Protestantism have contented themselves with the happy bits of Jesus—kind sayings, acts of charity. On the other hand there has been a tendency in other forms of Protestantism to emphasize only the 'Cross' of Jesus—if Christians are forced to pick only one accomplishment of Christ it is a good choice. But we are not meant to abstract this or that bit of Jesus, but confess the 'catholic' (not Roman Catholic!), the 'catholic' that is the oldest, universal Christian faith.

We are told throughout our Scriptures (as you have heard) and in our Creed (which we shall again repeat), and in our prayers over the gifts on the Table, that it is the whole life of Christ among us, the whole incarnation that matters.

If we don't confess, and celebrate together, and internalize the whole life of Christ, we shall be impoverished, and almost helpless, at the birth of children, or in our temptations, or during our 'bloody Sweat' or the hour of our death—as the litany puts it.

Likewise if we don't confess any part of Christ's life we shall have given up or given away what was meant for our deliverance, salvation, health, re-birth. The church is not just another community charity or a Christian organization—though we are glad we are at least these. We are the 'body of Christ' as St. Paul put it, the body that brings all of Christ to the whole of our human predicament, and all the possibilities of our shared human future.

So, the first reason that the Ascension is important for us today is that the whole of Christ's life is vitally important to all of us.

The second reason that the Ascension is important for us today is that without the celebration of Christ's Ascension we would leave Christ's Gospel and our future incomplete.

St. Paul put it directly to the Ephesians: '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*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also 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.*'

Unlike the descriptive scenes described in our *Luke* and in our *Acts* readings today, we have the theological reflection of an Apostle not present at that great

⁴ Michael Rosen, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (London: Walker Books, 1989). No pages, of course.

scene of the Ascension so lovingly described. St. Paul often felt the weight of not having been in the company of the disciples.

And yet his reflection captures perfectly, for us (as for St. Paul and all those ‘born late in time’) the particular meaning of the Ascension for the church. And the meaning is this—Christ was proclaimed as King at his Ascension, his feet, as it were (and as in that painting) ‘over the head’ of all, whether legitimate King, or robber baron, or tin-pot despot.

In the days that St. Paul’s wrote to the Ephesians the standard greeting was ‘Caesar is Lord’. It was put more chillingly seventy years ago in Germany as ‘Heil, Hitler’. Well, the response of the early Christians was to say instead ‘Jesus is Lord’. And in the end, that is the duty and joy of every Christian to repeat.

And what do we mean when we repeat when we say ‘Jesus is Lord’—Jesus has ascended? May I quote a pope of the Roman church? Fifteen hundred years ago Leo the Great said this: ‘The ascension of Christ is our elevation. Hope for the body is where the glory of the head preceded us.’⁵

The Ascension of Jesus means that we have been given the spiritual responsibility to declare, and to begin to act out in God’s grace what it means to say that Jesus Christ who lived among us is now our King, and is taken us with him as part of his royal court. And it is a royal court consumed with worshipping its king, and with reigning with its king.

What does it mean to be ‘elevated with Christ’? It means not only our freedom to worship Christ as king and lord, but to share in Christ’s reign—in sharing in Christ’s feeding of the poor, and bringing justice to the unjustly treated. It means we are invited to share in holding out the hope of a new heaven and a new earth by how we live our lives here on Sundays together, and the rest of the week in the ascended lives God has granted us in divine mercy.

The Lord has ascended. Alleluia!
The Lord has taken us with him. Alleluia!

⁵ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p.393.