

ASCENSION DAY

Along with Easter itself, the season of Eastertide includes within it two other significant days. One is Pentecost; it occurs on the seventh Sunday after Easter, and thus signals the end of Eastertide. The second is Ascension Day which occurs 40 days after Easter. Because it occurs on the 40th day, it automatically occurs on the fifth Thursday after Easter. Because it does not occur on a Sunday, Ascension Day does not tend to receive the attention other holy days of the Christian Year receive. But it is, in reality, considered one of the chief feasts of the Christian Year. Therefore, to draw proper attention to it, the 7th Sunday of Eastertide is designated Ascension Sunday in many liturgical traditions.

Why is Ascension Day considered so important? And if it is so important, why then does the church insist upon observing it on a Thursday? Ascension Day is that day when, according to the Gospel writers (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53) and Acts (1:1-11), Jesus bodily left his church and ascended into heaven. The Acts of the Apostles tells us specifically that this ascension occurred forty days after Easter (1:3); that is why Ascension Day is celebrated forty days after Easter (and, consequently, always on the fifth Thursday). This event, therefore, is the final post-resurrection experience of Jesus to his disciples and church. On that day, Jesus' human nature was taken into Heaven, where He is seated at God's right hand and now exercises authority over both the world and His Church (John 14:1-7; Eph. 1:15-23; 4:9-10; Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 6:20; Rev. 3:21).

There is considerable evidence that Ascension Day was celebrated very early by the church. St. Augustine (354-430) reported that it was generally practiced throughout the whole church, and Chrysostom (437-407) and Socrates Scholasticus (380-450) both refer to its celebration as a pivotal festival of the Christian Year. The book, "the Pilgrimage of Etheria" describes a solemn procession on Ascension Day up the Mount of Olives where the Empress Helena (Constantine's mother) had built a chapel. All of these references indicate an extremely old and honored holy day, celebrated as faithfully by the Church as it celebrated Easter and Pentecost.

Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53; Psalm 47; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23

Acts 1:1-11 is Luke's second telling of Jesus' ascension (the first being Luke 24:44-53). It contains more detail than his account in the Gospel of Luke. The ascension story is preceded by this important statement: "After his suffering, (Jesus) presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). From this statement we learn two things about Jesus' resurrection. First, he appeared to the disciples "after his suffering" many times (not just the few incidents recorded in scripture) over a forty-day period (that is, either an actual 40 days or an undesignated but extended period of time). Second, the topic of his conversation with them was "the kingdom of God". He did not talk of himself nor of his resurrection nor even of the future of the church. He talked with them about the kingdom of God. And why? Because that was, according to Luke, Jesus' entire focus.

If the Gospel of Luke is about anything, it is about Jesus' teaching, working for and even dying for the kingdom of God. And that theme is carried over and dominates Luke's account of the

work of the apostles after Jesus' ascension, as it appears in the book of Acts (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

The Gospel of Luke is dominated by the theme of God's kingdom (it is the stated focus of 38 stories in that gospel account). In Luke, Jesus is committed to the bringing in of the kingdom of God. This kingdom will bring in its wake a grand reversal in which poverty and systems of domination will be eliminated and humanity will become all that God intended it to be. This reversal will occur through the intervention of Jesus as the one bringing about jubilee. Through his life and ministry, his empowering of people, his confrontation of the systems, his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus will set the stage for the resurrection of humanity into the world as God intended.

Evidence for the above assertion is displayed throughout the Gospel of Luke. The focus of Luke is on demonstrating that Jesus is a man for the people – the “little ones” of the earth who hold no political, economic, social or religious capital, who are marginalized and often oppressed by the systems of societal power. To them, Jesus brings the good news of a new and just kingdom – the kingdom of God.

The clearest indication that Luke's Gospel is committed to the jubilee and its liberation of the poor is found in Luke's unique handling of the Beatitudes. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Again, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5:3, 6). But Luke remembers Jesus' words differently. He records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk. 6:20-22).

Then Luke records Jesus continuing with words that do not appear in Matthew at all: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep” (Lk. 6:24-25). There will be a great reversal, Jesus proclaims in Luke. For the day will come when wealth and food will be redistributed, and those who currently enjoy the bounty of life will be destitute while those who are now oppressed and exploited will be on top – all because the wealthy and powerful would not share their wealth.

Clearly the content of the Gospel of Luke is consistent with Jesus' commission in Luke 4:18-19. Those stories are the lived-out reality of Jesus' mission call. His commission is to bring good news to the poor, to seek the release of captives, to bring sight to the blind, to work for the liberation of the oppressed and to insist upon the full implementation of jubilee so that wealth is effectively redistributed and poverty eliminated. According to Luke, Jesus' work was the work of the Messiah reestablishing jubilee throughout Israel and perhaps even the world.

And that to which Jesus is called, his followers are also called. When Jesus proclaimed in Luke, “The kingdom of God is among you,” he was indicating that God had already planted the seeds of the kingdom both *in us* and *in our midst* (the double meaning of the Greek in Lk. 17:21). So it then becomes our responsibility to carry on the ministry he initiated. “Whenever you enter a

town and its people welcome you, cure the sick who are there and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Lk. 10:8-9) And that is the message of Luke’s companion work, the Acts of the Apostles, which demonstrates the Christian community living out the jubilee regulations in their life together (see Acts 2:1-47; 4:32—5:16; 11:29-30; compare I Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor. 9:1-15; Gal. 2:1-10) and carrying the good news of God’s kingdom throughout Israel (Acts 1:1—8:3), Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), the Gentile world (Acts 8:26—21:16) and finally to Rome (Acts 21:17—28:31).

This lectionary lesson for today then moves on from Jesus’ presence with the disciples to his final meeting with them, as he commissions them to their new mission. That commission is “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). The task of the church, as commissioned by Jesus in Acts, is to be Jesus “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. Their task is to be a witness. Witnessing is a primary emphasis in the book of Acts (stated 18 times in 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20, 33; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 18:5; 20:21, 24; 22:15, 18, 20; 23:11; 26:16; 28:23).

This is an appropriate response to kingdom work in the Roman Empire. A Christian and the church could witness to the kingdom, could live out the kingdom in their individual and common life-styles (Acts 2:43-47), could both practice kingdom economics and encourage a wider practice of such economics (Acts 4:32-35), could practice within their midst a political order of justice and compassion and could proclaim an alternative vision of a society free of political domination. But what they were not permitted to do was to work politically for the kingdom. Those Christians who were Roman citizens could use their citizenship for the benefit of the church and to protect themselves (as did Paul). But unless they were of noble Roman birth, they would never be permitted to enter the world of politics, and therefore could not reform the system from within.

Today’s lesson then ends with Jesus’ ascent into the heavens. Unlike all of the other accounts of Jesus’ ascension, however, Luke adds in his Acts account something that appears in no other account. Luke tells us, “While (Jesus) was ascending and (the disciples) were gazing up 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”” (Acts 1:10-11).

“Why are you looking up into heaven? This same Jesus will return”. Why is this story included by Luke in this account in Acts? It is there in order to call the newly-birthered church to its mission, a mission that is not “gazing into heaven” awaiting with anticipation the return of Jesus but rather is directed toward being Christ to the world.

Verses 10-11 have a double meaning. First, they are spoken to assure the disciples that Jesus will return. The Christians needn’t speculate or worry about that fact. Second, those words are spoken to redirect the Christian’s gaze and, consequently, their actions. They are not meant to go through life “looking up into heaven” and endlessly speculating on Christ’s return or on any other points of theology for that matter. Rather, they are to center their efforts on proclaiming and acting out the kingdom upon the earth. They are to be a mission people, not a speculating

people. God will act to have Jesus return when God is ready to do so. You can trust God to take this action without our encouragement! Meanwhile, our task is not to keep on “looking up into heaven” but to get about the work God has given us: working for Christ and his Kingdom here on earth!

Luke 24:44-53 is both the conclusion of the Gospel of St. Luke, and one of the two ascension stories told by Luke (the other being Acts 1:1-11). In Luke 24:36-43, the resurrected Jesus appears before all the disciples. Some think he is a ghost. Jesus makes clear to them and demonstrates that he is no ghost, showing them his hands and feet and eating in front of them. He then says, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. . . . Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (24:44, 46-48).

This is the second reference in this chapter of Luke to the law being fulfilled in Jesus (24:27 being the other). At first, this seems incongruous in a book supposedly written primarily to Gentiles. Why would Gentiles either care about or be aware of Hebraic prophecy or Mosaic law-obedience? But a major theme running throughout Luke has been the fulfilling of (and even exceeding of) the Deuteronomic vision of God’s intentions for the structuring of human society. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and upon the inauguration of the kingdom of God through those actions, the dream of the Mosaic authors, the prophets and the psalmists (vs. 44) had been fulfilled. All for which they had planned and dreamed and worked and taught had been fulfilled through this action of the Son of God. And now it is to be proclaimed, the good news of the world’s liberation from oppression, exploitation and system-dominance shared and the kingdom of God given space to spring into reality. It is to this task – to make it so – that the Church is now called in this passage.

“Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (24:47-49).

This proclaiming of the kingdom of God, living into it and acting responsibly in bringing it to fruition now becomes the assignment of the church. “You are witnesses of these things”. But first, Jesus instructs them to wait for the indwelling empowerment of the Holy Spirit, for they are not to seek the transformation of the city without first receiving the Holy Spirit. So they are to “stay here in the city” until they have been clothed with power from on high; then they are to go forth to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of Luke then ends with these words, “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” (24:50-53).

This is the ending of Luke – the disciples and Jesus gathering near the town of Bethany outside Jerusalem where they received God’s blessings and watched Jesus “carried up into heaven”. So they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, following Jesus’ instructions to wait in the city until Pentecost when they would be “clothed with power from on high” by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is assumed that the book of Acts will then follow, presenting how the disciple band and then the Church that grew around them reached out into the world, bringing the transformation of the gospel to both individuals and corporate society alike, and modeling within their life together as a Church the acting out of the kingdom of God upon the earth.

But the Gospel of Luke ends as it began. In its conclusion, Luke has artfully brought the story full circle back to Jerusalem, back to worship in the temple, and back to its beginning with Jesus’ birth and the adoration of the shepherds. The story began with the priest Zechariah worshipping in the temple (Luke 1:5-25) and there struck dumb by God’s words to him, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. With the spirit of Elijah he will go before (the Messiah) to turn the disobedience (of the systems) to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:13, 17). So the story begins in Jerusalem with God’s follower worshipping God in the temple. And the story ends in Jerusalem with Jesus’ followers worshipping God in the temple and giving glory to God.

Likewise, in the story of the angels encounter with the shepherds, those heavenly messengers came down from heaven to announce the coming of the Messiah both to the world and particularly to the poor and marginalized. For the angels pick Israel’s most marginalized and despised to whom to appear – shepherds! It is they who are instructed to “find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”; so they go and worship him as their Messiah and Lord.

That story ends, “When (the shepherds) saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. . . . The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:17-18, 20).

Now, in the final story of the Gospel of Luke, Christ ascends back into the heavens from which he and the angels who announced his birth came. He leaves behind him another marginalized people – the disciples who are to shepherd a new, fledgling and struggling church by pointing all humanity to the Babe of Bethlehem and the kingdom he came to inaugurate. And finally, they returned to Jerusalem as the shepherd 33 years earlier returned to their flock, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” – so that the close of Luke ends as it began – in a cacophony of praise to God for what God has done for the salvation of people, the liberation of humanity and the transformation of society into God’s new social, political, economic and spiritual order through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – the King who would be a Man! Thus does the Gospel of Luke end.

Psalm 47 deals with God’s rule over the nations, picking up and expanding that theme as presented in Psalm 46. Psalm 46 proclaimed that God had sanctified and blessed the city with God’s presence. He therefore protects the city against all harm. The city is made holy by God’s

presence in it, and therefore it is God who keeps it from chaos, collapse and evil. That is how much God loves the city.

The urban framework of Psalm 47 is presented in two verses. The first is “God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet” (47:5). The second is “God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne” (vs. 8).

But to where is God traveling? And where does he sit on his holy throne? The answer, of course, is Jerusalem! This psalm is a triumphal procession, an enthronement psalm. It celebrates God’s enthronement in Jerusalem – perhaps at the dedication of the Temple. And to his city, his capital, his palace, God periodically returns, as the people celebrate and rejoice. Thus, the psalm begins, “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth” (vss. 1-2).

The psalmist then justifies his perception of God as the great conquering hero: “He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves” (vss. 3-4).

This passage adds to the argument that this is a pre-exilic hymn, perhaps going back to the time of the United Kingdom. God is portrayed both as conquering hero of all competitor nations and as the one who is building the traditions and heritage of Israel. Thus the praise continues: “Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm” (vss. 6-7).

For not only is God the conquering king. He is the center of the universe! And the nation, recognizing this and thus rejecting their gods, gather to worship and to be led by Yahweh alone. “God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the people’s gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted” (vss. 8-9).

Why, then, should Psalm 47 be chosen to be used in the liturgy of Ascension Day? Well, what greater ascension is there than for God’s intentions for the liberation, salvation and transformation of God’s world to take place through the death and resurrection of his Son? Ascension Day is the day when God’s son ascends to all that God created him to be and called upon him to build God’s Kingdom. If the ascension of a king of Israel was sufficient to cause the writing of Psalm 47, that ascension is as nothing compared to the rejoicing heavenly chorus that welcomes the ascendancy of the King of glory to his throne. Thus, it is a most fitting psalm for the celebration of Ascension Day!

Psalm 93 is the second of the enthronement hymns recorded in the book of Psalms (the other psalm for Ascension Day – Psalm 47 – being the other hymn). It is considerably shorter than the previous psalm, but perhaps even more definitive in its implications of God’s enthronement.

The psalm can be divided into three parts. The first part, verses 1-2, deal with God’s presentation of himself, what is normally called in theology a “theophany”. “Yahweh is king; he

is robed in majesty; Yahweh is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world: it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting”.

God’s majesty does not depend upon human response. Because God is the creator and controller of all that exists, from energy to planet, from radiation to galaxies, he is the ground of his being. He is Yahweh – “he who causes to be what is caused to be”. He does not need the adulation or even the obedience of humanity for him to be God, for he is already God; “he has established the world” and therefore his throne “shall never be moved”! God is – and because God is, God is present. As C.G. Jung had carved over the doorframe of his home, “Bidden or unbidden, God is present”!

The second part moves from a statement of God’s being to that of God’s creative power. “The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their waves; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is Yahweh” (vss. 3-4).

Like all the ancient peoples, the Israelites believed that the earth was flat and was centered between two halves of a dome. The dome below them held the oceans at bay. And the dome above them held out the waters of chaos from inundating the world, much as an upside-down bowl can be pressed below the surface of a tank of water with air-pressure keeping the waters from inundating the underside of the bowl. Those waters, held at bay by the earth’s dome, were called by the Hebrews “the flood” (incidentally, in the story of Noah’s flood, they believed that because of the action of God, those waters of chaos broke through the dome and thus flooded the world). It is that perception of reality that is the base of what the Psalmist wrote in verses 3-4.

Thus, the Psalmist is declaring that a central act of the enthroned God is that he holds back the waters of chaos. Yahweh is the Creator God. He is the one who created the earth out of chaos and protects it from any incursion of chaos. Therefore, he is a monarch with whom one is not to trifle, for he is the creator and maintainer of the world.

The third part deals with God as the God of history, establishing and maintaining world order. “Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore” (vs. 5). God judges the nations, creates the laws by which society functions, and orders all of life. God is the universal ruler of the world. And that universal rule is best expressed and acted out in the gift of God’s divine Law – the Torah. Thus, Yahweh is the God of both nature and of history. And thus, it is only right that he be enthroned as the God of the whole world!

Ephesians 1:15-23 begins with Paul’s prayer for his beloved Christians throughout the Roman Empire. He prays that they may know the hope to which God has called them and the “immeasurable greatness of his power” (1:17-19). Paul’s prayer is the prayer of a father who is facing his own death – a prayer for his children who without him must now face the powers of Rome. The church of the first century is so little – and Rome is both so large and mighty. Therefore, Paul prays that the Christians will be filled with God’s power as they face Roman authority and might – a power that will give them spiritual discernment, the capacity never to lose the awareness of what God has already done for them in Christ, the determination that they

must never “take their eyes off the prize” of an empire won to Christ and the conviction that they are a people of power because they belong to the Lord of all power!

Emboldened by his prayer, Paul then moves into the most astonishing statement in the entire letter of Ephesians – a proclamation that would guarantee that the church would be persecuted by Rome! Having reminded the church in his prayer that we Christians are people of God’s power, Paul elaborates on the power of God that the church can access as it engages Rome. The power of God is such, Paul states, that God raised Jesus from the dead and has crowned him the monarch of heaven and earth, ruling over every government (“rule”), head of state (“authority” or “principality”), constituting powers of that state (“power”) and all its territories (“dominions”). Of course, Paul is clearly referring to the Roman Empire.

To Christians living in the first century this was clearly and unequivocally an extreme political statement! Ephesians 1:20-23 would have been read by any Christian – and any Roman – from the standpoint of the universal belief at that time that an action in heaven would make inevitable its eventual occurrence on earth. Therefore they would immediately see that the following is what Paul was actually declaring:

“God has crowned Jesus as the emperor of heaven. God has already seated Jesus upon the throne and has already placed him over all nations and empires (“thrones” or “rule”), all rulers (“principalities” or “authorities”), all governments (“powers”), and all their territories (“dominions”), both in heaven and on earth, both now (“this age”) and as God’s will is inevitably worked out through all the governments that are to come (“the age to come”).”

What Paul so boldly proclaimed is that Christ has already been crowned king over all nations, economic orders and civilizations that do now or will eventually exist. Or, in other words, Paul is here declaring that **Jesus is the Caesar of the entire world** – including Rome! The man in Rome who presently calls himself “Caesar” is an imposter!

Now do you see why the Christians were persecuted? The real offense that the Christians were to Rome was not that they were of another religion, but that they declared that their Lord was the true and authentic ruler (or “Caesar”) of the world. They recognized Jesus as their Caesar, rather than Nero. And that made them a threat to the future of the Roman Empire.

But Paul is not done. He continues, “(God) has made (Jesus) the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). Here Paul is declaring that the means by which Jesus will become the ruler over all the Romes of the world (“the head over all things”) is through God’s use of the church. **The church will be the means** God will use to win the world to allegiance to Jesus. Therefore the church is to work to bring to reality in society what has been preordained because it has already been accomplished in heaven. If the church is faithful in fulfilling this assignment, the world will experience “the fullness of him who fills all in all”.

Paul declares that the church – this little band of apparently helpless “nobodies” – has been chosen to be God’s means for bringing about the submission of Rome to Christ. Such submission will not happen by the church aping the dominating use of power that the Roman

systems use to tyrannize the world. Rather it will happen as the church seeks to influence those systems through its practice of justice with love as it engages the systems through its use of relational power.

Ephesians 1:15-23 teaches us that we Christians are called by God to be change agents in the world. But we will be so used by God only to the degree that the church actively involves itself in working for justice and transformation in the public arena. And we will be so used by God only to the degree that we practice “Jesus-power” (relational, trust-building power) in our engagement of the world’s systems rather than unilateral or dominating power as do the systems of the world.

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