

Sunday after Ascension

A few years ago, I was standing in line to pay my bill at a local restaurant. The lady in front of me and I struck up a conversation.

Seeing my clerical collar, she asked what church I was with. I told her. As we continued to talk, I mentioned I had just come from an Ascension Day service.

She looked perplexed and asked, “Ascension, what’s that?”

I explained that it referred to Jesus’ visible parting from the disciples 40 days after Easter.

“I’ve read the Bible and don’t remember that story,” she said.

“Look it up,” I responded.

She is not alone. Ascension does not always get the play it deserves. It might be called the Church's neglected feast.

Why should we care? Why is Ascension important?

Well, first because it completes the earthly ministry of Jesus. The story of the divine descent would be incomplete without the Son of Man's re-ascent.

Secondly, the Ascension set the stage for the expansion of Jesus' work and ministry. Likely, Jesus' followers would never have set off on their own and gone into all the world with the Gospel if Jesus had continued to appear. They would have been tied to those appearances.

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the Ascension tells of Jesus' Kingship.

Luke, both in his Gospel and in Acts, tells us what happened. Forty days after Easter Day. Jesus took the disciples as far as Bethany (about two miles outside of Jerusalem), went into a cloud and was parted from their sight.

But to find out what that means, we must go back to Daniel in the Old Testament. In chapter 7 of this book, we find the prophet having a vision. It is of a human figure – “one like the Son of man” – coming on the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days (God) and being enthroned as co-regent.

What does Daniel’s vision tell us about Jesus going into a cloud?

It says He is now reigning in heaven. He is the ultimate authority . . . the one to whom all human authorities must answer . . . whether they acknowledge Him in the present or not.

More than that, Jesus's Ascension sets the stage for His reentry at the Second Coming. According to Acts, as the disciples were craning their necks watching Jesus go up, an angel appeared to them and said:

“Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

There is more to the story still.

What about ‘clouds’? What do they signify?

We have only to think back to the time of the Exodus to get our answer.

Clouds represent the resplendent glory and presence of the living God.

Remember a cloud hovered over Mount Sinai when Moses went up to receive the Tables of the Law.

Remember a cloud led the children of Israel by day and a ball of fire by night as they made their way towards the Promised Land.

Remember at times a cloud would fill the Tabernacle, the place of meeting.

Fast forward to the time of Solomon, remember a cloud so filled the Temple at its dedication that the priests could not stand and do their work.

Clouds both conceal and reveal the awesome presence of the Almighty. Jesus going into a cloud thus has significance beyond the bare act.

With Daniel 7 in mind, we shouldn't imagine Jesus going 10 or 1000 or 10,000 miles up, as in a rocket. Rather we should think of

Him entering the heavenly dimension, God's throne room, and becoming King.

What I have said thus far is rather mystical and ethereal, but what does this event – the Ascension -- have to do with life on the ground . . . with us in the here and now?

Let me suggest this: When we look out on the world and see all the horrible atrocities, it is easy to get discouraged . . . to say, the devil is having it his way and is winning.

Jesus' Ascension tells us otherwise. It tells us that evil in principle has been defeated and that Jesus is already reigning . . . in heaven. The problem is down below in this earthly dimension.

Thus, in the Lord's Prayer we pray: "Thy kingdom come . . . on EARTH as it is in heaven."

More than that, we have a part to play in this operation. What is that part?

First, we are to put the little bit of earth most directly under our control under Christ's rule.

Secondly, we are to witness to the kingdom or reign of God in our private and public lives.

Are we doing this?

The illustration I am going to use is old, going back to the '70s, but it is still good.

If it were a crime to be a Christian and you had been arrested, would there be enough evidence to convict.

Answer guilty or not guilty to the following charges:

--Continually using the name of Jesus Christ and trying to get others to follow Him.

--Openly reading and studying the Bible and being in the Lord's house on the Lord's day.

--Reaching out to those in need in practical ways.

--Advocating for public polices which protect the poor, the aged and little children, including the unborn. ///

May prayer is that we would be be convicted on all counts.

The kingship of Christ is not just a concept in the head but something we do with our hands, feet and voice in the here and now.

Today on the Sunday after Ascension we continue to celebrate Jesus' kingship. But we also look forward to Pentecost.

Just before going into the cloud, Jesus instructed His followers to go back to Jerusalem and wait . . . wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In liturgical time, we also wait. This Sunday is sometimes called **Waiting Sunday**. *Dominica Expectationis* was its name in pre-reformation times.

The disciples were obedient to their Lord's command. They went back to Jerusalem and stayed put.

I think there is something we can learn from their example. Standing still is still important.

Our instinct is to charge ahead, to get on with our agenda, which we assume to be God's. Like horses at the Kentucky Derby, we can't wait to get out of the gate and get running.

But there is a lot to be said for waiting, for seeking direction from the One spoken of in today's Gospel as the **Comforter**.

That title is a bit misleading. Today 'comfort' is associated with ease, but its older meaning has to do with strength.

That is what we require, God's strength.

The Comforter or the Strengthener turns the spotlight onto Jesus . . . witnesses to Him by convicting and convincing men of their sin and need of a saviour.

The Comforter or Strengthener reveals His will and His truth.

The Comforter or Strengthener keeps us off the wrong path and onto the right one.

The Comforter or Strengthener gives efficacy to the Christian's work and witness.

If the disciples had set off on their own, they would have fallen flat on their faces. The same will be our fate if we charge ahead under our own steam.

John Richard Green is a case in point. He was a young, idealistic 19th-century Oxford-trained clergymen who wanted to make difference. And so, he went to the East Side of London – at the time a place of extreme poverty and degradation.

There, he set up libraries, taught classes and cleaned the streets. When his efforts seemed to be getting nowhere, he gave up and went back to Oxford where he wrote a history of England.

But not long after, another man operating under the power of the Holy Spirit, a man by the name of William Booth, went into the same area and began preaching Christ and the cross.

Gradually things began to change for the better. Drunkards became sober, thieves became honest men. The Bible came in and sin went out.

What was the difference? One man charged ahead with zeal and noble ideas, the other with power from on high.

Waiting leads to effective witness. Let's learn from the disciples in this regard. ///

Christ has come.

Christ has risen.

Christ has ascended and is reigning.

Let us keep the feast!