

How should we celebrate Ascension Day in the midst of coronavirus pandemic? Is there anything really worthy to celebrate? The risen Christ has gone to heaven, and we have no clue where heaven is. He promised to be coming back to the world but so far no indication he will be returning.

Ascension Day has no secular counterpart and hence no commercial products for it. But sadly Christians or churches have also ignored its celebration. I mentioned it in my 2018 sermon; even a renowned theological college in Sydney doesn't celebrate it, so no wonder the clergy it trains have no clue why they should remember Ascension Day, let alone to celebrate it.

But Ascension Day is very important for a simple reason that it warns us that Christians could so easily have gone back to their former life once again. Listen to the rebuke the disciples of Jesus received from the two angels: *'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?'* Have you ever asked why the angels didn't address them 'Beloved disciples of Jesus' or 'You apostles of Christ' or 'Leaders of the Jerusalem Church.'? Once Jesus was gone, out of sight, then out of mind. They could easily have gone back to their former trade, becoming fishermen once again.

Hence, as we come to celebrate the Ascension let us be reminded, it is a day we should be warned sternly that we could have easily gone back to our former life for the very simple fact that we do not see or experience that Jesus is around us or with us.

You may say, we are not the early disciples, they copped the rebuke because they were so shocked that they didn't really know how to respond what had happened in the last forty days. In fact we should sympathize with them. First, they were astounded to see their expected Messiah executed on Calvary. Their hopes were dashed. Then three days later, they encountered even a greater shock, they met up with the risen Lord. They were totally speechless, they didn't know how to respond. They seemed to have roller coasting for forty days with the risen Lord in their midst. They kept mumbling without knowing what

they said. Hence, they asked Jesus the question: '*When are you to manifest yourselves to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.*' That is what they meant when they asked him, '*When will you restore the Kingdom of Israel?*'

Before they could reflect on Jesus' reply to their question, they met the shock of their life - the risen Lord ascended into heaven. So shocked were they that they kept gazing up toward heaven. It was only then they had to be brought back to their normal senses. That is where they received the rebuke from the angels.

We would never have the same shocks as they had encountered, but that does not mean we would not receive the same rebuke. Because we fall into the same mistake by constantly gazing toward heaven. That is to say we have wrong sense of priority. We put heaven before earth; we ignore our commitment to earth and speculate or fancy our heavenly abode.

You retort: does not the Bible inform us '*our citizenship is in heaven?*' Are we not charged to '*seek the things above where Christ sits on the right hand of God?*' Are we not commanded '*to lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven?*' for the very reason that '*where our treasure is our hearts will be there also?*' In what sense then can we be required to avert our gaze from heaven, and to fix our eyes on the earth?

The disciples were eager to know the exact time - the year and the date and the hour - when their king would come and claim his kingdom. They could not submit to wait patiently.

The church has constantly made the same mistake. During the Reformation, some Protestant churches made it as the defining moment of their church's existence, ignoring the very fact that their forebears were fervently expecting the coming of Christ on earth in the midst of their political turmoil.

Now we are facing unprecedented pandemic and perhaps some Christians deep down in their hearts would be wondering whether this

is the real time for them to prepare for their Lord's coming back to earth.

Whenever there are extraordinary happenings in our midst, we become so easily disturbed and lose our sense of priority - we suddenly turn our eyes towards heaven, as though Christ would be returning at this very moment of time to relieve our pain and sorrow.

There is a highly practical way of regarding the Ascension; and there is also an eminently unpractical way. We have been warned by the angels not to gaze towards heaven.

Before the Ascension, Jesus had already given the answer to the disciples which is also the ever present answer to the church: *'It is not for you to know the times or the seasons.'* If the Ascension Day warns us the danger of falling back into former pre-Christian life, it also reminds the church it possesses such a thing called a holy, patient waiting attitude. Christians' attitude with respect to Christ's second coming is always calm and continuous expectation whatever external circumstances may occur.

So what are we to celebrate the Ascension Day? With the warning and reminding we learn a very important lesson. We cannot and must not speculate when and where the ascended Christ is in terms of locality and time. Instead of gazing towards heaven we are to wait patiently upon his coming again. But waiting does not mean we are idling. Waiting means contemplation of the Ascended Christ. That is the focus of our celebration.

We are to contemplate the Ascended Christ. In other words, we are to ascend to where he is. Do you not notice in John's Gospel, Peter was commanded by the Risen Lord, after their intriguing conversation by the Lake of Galilee: 'Follow me.' To avoid 'stand and gazing towards heaven' we must follow Christ even after his ascension. There we see his humanity exalted, enthroned and glorified. If that is not the case, our celebration with the Eucharist means nothing at all. With this contemplation, we celebrate with uttermost joy because we are now

seated with Christ, with Him even now, in the heavenly places. In contemplation we are to realize Christ is still a living Being, still a living person, as the Book of Hebrews says, though *'he in every respect has been tested as we are, but without sin'*. and has now entered into the heavenly sanctuary, the Holy of Holies and there makes atonement for our sins. Furthermore, as you ascend in contemplation, you realize if Christ has not gone away, the Comforter, the Helper, the Guide of all truth could never have come to us and remain with us forever.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, stand no more gazing towards heaven. But return from the mount of the Ascension, to where you live and work, to the duty of your vocation, to the struggles of your daily life. There continue waiting, in prayer and in supplication; there wait in confidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There live and bear witness to Christ, that you may win yourselves, may win others, to the almighty and loving God.