ASCENSION

THE NEW SHOFAR

Just as [Jesus] remains with us after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him… Christ is exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear… While in heaven he is also with us, and we while on earth are with him.
St Augustine

Psalm 66 - Call to Praise

The Ascension is one of those significant days in the Liturgical Calendar that can for many contemporary believers prove to be a reality difficult to understand. However, the feast itself is a source of great grace, strengthening our hope and filling us with peace. If the Ascension has led us to faith in a disembodied, removed God who is watching us "from a distance", we have missed its message. Whatever the disciples saw happen that day, the facts of the experience are far less important than the meaning. The Ascension certainly does not mean that heaven is "up", hell is "down", and God is looking down on us from some far-removed place. Rather, the Ascension offers us several crucial truths that, in this world of injustice and inequality, we desperately need to reclaim.

Firstly, the fact that Jesus did not die but was seen to "return" to the Godhead physically is a continuation of the story of incarnation. God does not despise the human body – rather God embraces it, inhabits it, and glorifies it, making human flesh part of the Godhead! This means that the needs of the body – for food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, and loving, intimate touch – are all part of the Gospel and are included in God's gift of salvation. ***Secondly,*** the Ascension declares as clearly and loudly as can be that Jesus, and not Caesar (nor any other Empire, government, system, philosophy, movement or social hierarchy) is Lord over all. This means that our ultimate allegiance must be to Christ first, and that our lives are called to reflect Christ's reign amid the other forces and 'lords' that influence and control our world. ***Finally,*** the Ascension always comes with the promise of the Holy Spirit's power which tells us that God is not absent and removed from us but continues to be completely immersed in the world and in the lives of human beings.

The Gift of the Hopy Spirit

The gift of the Spirit also assures us of God's resources and God's inspiration and God's guidance to strengthen and enable us as we seek to live as faithful followers of Christ. It may be tempting to make this celebration about Christian triumphalism, but that would be to deny the meaning of Christ's earthly life. Rather, the Ascension is the necessary next step in that life, ensuring that God remains involved with human beings, that God's presence continues to be available to us, and that we know that everything that makes us human – including our physicality – has been embraced and welcomed into God. It's less about "Christianity" defeating all, and more about Christ drawing all things into the life of God.

In every organisation, every community, every family, every church, power has the potential to turn into a struggle. In every human collective there is the potential for abuse, exploitation, and exclusion. But, the Ascension calls us to a different way of being. It begins with a personal recognition of the value that Jesus places on every human being – including ourselves. That Christ would take on our flesh, live our life, die our death, and then rise and take the place of authority over our human world, indicates the extent

to which Christ is concerned to change the human system in which only some are valued, and others count for nothing. Then, celebrating the Ascension calls us to work, in our own small corner of the world, to embody the reign of Christ – the justice, equality, compassion, and inclusion that Jesus demonstrated in his life, and that he expresses as Lord of all (not just Lord of some).

This means that we must strive to celebrate all people and their humanity, not just those who are “special” or “important” in some way. This means that we must learn to value every part of our humanness and teach others to do the same – honouring the beauty and dignity in every person and seeking to preserve the sacredness in the most intimate of human connections – hospitality, identity, and sexuality. This also means that, as church, the Ascension calls us to be a community of liberation not condemnation, of celebration not judgment, of this-worldly concern and compassion not other-worldly. A question for today, then, is in what ways can we express some of these realities in our Ascension Day worship?

Our Bodies truly are Temples of the Holy Spirit

It is easy to think of Heaven as a merely spiritual reality in which we are free from the physical toil and sorrow of this earthly life. But we never ought to forget that Heaven is for bodies, too. *We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*. Today’s feast of the Ascension is a reminder that we ought to see our own bodies – and use our bodies – with such an eye toward higher things.

We humans do not make any sense without our bodies. Sure, we can imagine ourselves (and unfortunately many people today do so imagine themselves and others) as a mind or spirit or “consciousness” trapped in a body of flesh and blood. All aspects of our human lives and existence on this earth then only have the meaning we give to it. Accordingly, we imagine ourselves at liberty to manipulate and use all this mere stuff within such ever-expanding limits our technology, or the market, or our passions will allow.

The misery caused by this way of seeing ourselves and our world is incalculable. The Ascension is, in a way, the antidote to this hopelessness. If Jesus has triumphed and is with the Father, then history has meaning, our lives have direction, and our faith is not in vain.

Beyond the Clouds, a Living Promise

The Ascension reminds us that we were not created to remain anchored to the earthly creation but are called to a full life in eternity. Today more than ever, in a world that moves fast and is disconnected from the transcendent, speaking of the Ascension is to speak of meaning, promise, and future.

The biblical accounts of the Ascension agree on something fundamental: Jesus does not disappear, He **ascends**. He does not vanish or fade away but enters into a new dimension of existence: heavenly glory, the fullness of communion with the Father. The Ascension is not an escape from the world but the fulfillment of the earthly mission of the Messiah. Having conquered death and sin on the Cross and in the Resurrection, Jesus enters the glory that is rightfully His as the Son of God and Lord of history. From heaven,

Jesus does not cease caring for us. He is our advocate, our defender, our High Priest who presents our lives before the Father**.**