

THE DEPARTURE OF JESUS

Acts 1. 1-11

Ephesians 1. 15-23

Luke 24. 44-53

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Many people who read our passage in St Luke's gospel get stuck when it says that our Lord 'withdrew from (his disciples) and was carried up into heaven.' This seems to imply that in order for the Ascension to make sense, we need to think of Jesus being transported through the clouds and sky. I am reminded of Nikita Khrushchev, the Premier of the Soviet Union in the fifties and sixties, who in a speech about the State's anti-religion campaign stated that Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin 'had flown into space, but didn't see any God there.' By that, Khrushchev was implying that all religion is false.

Our gospel text will only make sense when we shift the focus from Christ floating away on the clouds to what these verses are now saying about the relationship between Christ and God. And this implies a new understanding of heaven. Heaven is not so much a 'geographical place', but rather an expression which describes where God resides. In order to really understand the Ascension, we must understand how significant it is that our Lord is now with God.

It could even be said that a new view of God emerges from our biblical texts that describe the Ascension. At the end of Luke 24, we read that the first act of the disciples was to worship Jesus after he was taken away to heaven. These followers of Christ, all pious Jews, knew that God alone was to be worshipped. But they have now understood that it is no longer possible to talk about God without talking about

Jesus. From here on, the disciples' 'lens' for thinking about God (and ours) must always include a crucified, risen, and living Christ.

Most people (Christians included) seem to naturally lapse into a view of God that makes 'sense' from a reasonable point of view. That is, they imagine God to be perfect in the sense that he is beyond all limitations of time and space. They consider that God is unchanging and all-powerful; they believe that God is majestic, sovereign and eternal. And it is possible, of course, to find scripture passages that support these claims about God. It is not that these claims are wrong. Rather, they are incomplete, because the God who is now being worshipped by the disciples in our passage is a God who (through his Son) also knows loneliness, betrayal, rejection, thirst, and even death.

The ascension of our Lord into heaven alters our picture of God. We can no longer define God in a way that leaves him completely detached from human experience. The ascended Jesus, who sits at God's right hand, reveals a God who is vulnerable and even approachable. When we turn to God in times of distress or temptation, we are not addressing a deity who is aloof and unfamiliar with our struggles. God knows our trials intimately well; and not only comforts us by identifying with our pain, but also assures us that affliction will not have the final word. Because the truth is that the risen and ascended Christ now intercedes for us; and nothing can separate us from his love (Rom 8. 34).

If we look closely at our texts on the Ascension, we see that there is also a strong emphasis on divine forgiveness in them. The very appearance of the resurrected Christ to his disciples was first and foremost a message of forgiveness. Do you remember? When he appeared to them, the ones who fled and denied our Lord were not reminded of their cowardice and faintness of heart. Rather, Jesus's first words to his confused and bewildered followers were, 'Peace be with you' (Lk 24. 36).

This word of forgiveness was not meant just for his disciples, his closest companions during his earthly ministry. This radical word of mercy was to inform their entire mission to the world. As Christ says to his disciples in our gospel passage, ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ are to be proclaimed in (my) name to all nations’ (24. 47).

And the ascension of our Lord himself underlines this mission of mercy. The actual way in which Jesus took leave of his followers is often overlooked. We are told that Christ and his disciples went to Bethany where ‘...lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven’ (24. 50-51). Our Lord’s departure to heaven is accompanied by a blessing of lifted hands. These are the very hands that still bore the wounds of the one who was murdered on a Roman cross. Jesus commissioned the first witnesses of his ascension and then provided them with a remarkable message of forgiveness. The last image that the disciples had of their betrayed leader was a dramatic sign of mercy.

This dramatic sign of mercy continues to be sent by the one who sits at the right hand of God to all the members of his Church: past, present and future.

Amen.