

## THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

Daniel 7. 9-14

Acts 1. 1-11

Luke 24. 44-53

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

On the south wall of St Stephen's Church, behind our Children's Corner, stands a triptych, painted by Margaret Walter. Only the central portion of the triptych is visible; and it depicts the risen Christ departing from his disciples. The ascending Christ stretches his hands out in blessing on his disciples as he is taken away from them.

If you study the triptych, you will see that it shows the disciples watching as our Lord stretches open the sky and enters heaven. Looking at the faces of the disciples, we can ask ourselves, 'Were they worshipping?' 'Were they surprised and amazed?' 'Were they sorrowful?' Perhaps all of these interpretations are possible. Whatever the disciples may have thought as they looked on, it seems that for two angels who are cited in our reading from Acts, Jesus's ascension into heaven was no surprise. Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles recounts the story in a very matter-of-fact manner, as if these things happened every day. And while they may not exactly have occurred every day, Scripture and other early Christian writings do tell us about a number of people who ascended to heaven: the prophets Elijah (2 Kgs 2. 11-12), Isaiah and Baruch, a disciple of Jeremiah (cf. *The Ascension of Isaiah*) all went up on high.

In the Jewish tradition, ascension to heaven was a gift of God to those whom he loved. Rather than see death, they would be lifted directly into God's presence. In the case of Elijah, this took a spectacular form: the prophet was carried on high in a whirlwind, on a chariot of fire, drawn back to God by horses of fire.

Christ's ascension, which we celebrate today, shares this aspect of the prophets' ascent to heaven: it is an incredible display of the divine power at work within him. But unlike the ascension of the prophets, who attained glory without first tasting death, our Lord's ascension certainly was not a way of entering heaven that bypassed death.

During a night-time conversation with Nicodemus which is recorded in the third chapter of St John's gospel, Jesus spoke about the idea of ascending to heaven. He told Nicodemus, 'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (Jn 3. 13). In order truly to *ascend* to heaven, Christ first needed to descend to earth. In order to show to others the glory of God, he first had to empty himself of that glory, by taking on our mortal life.

In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul echoes this insight. He writes, 'When it says, "He ascended", what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth?' (Eph 4. 9). For Paul, 'our Lord ascended', does not just mean 'our Lord went into heaven'. Before Jesus could ascend to the heavenly glory, he first had to ascend to the cross. Christ ascended to the cross only to descend, to plunge into the depths of suffering and death and into hell, in order to chain the powers that kept humankind captive. As Paul explains, 'When he ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive (4. 8);<sup>1</sup> and 'he who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things' (4.10).

This, then, is the first difference between our Lord's ascension and that of those who had ascended to God before him: Jesus's ascension is not a passive homecoming to God's glory, but rather his active engagement with the powers that had kept humankind imprisoned in sin and death. It is, in fact, two ascensions. One that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a quotation taken from Ps 68. 18. There is a further reference in the New Testament to Christ descending to hell (1 Pet 3. 19-20); and in this reference, it is implied that Christ preached to the imprisoned spirits whilst he was there, and opened the gates of heaven for the just who had gone before him.

concluded Christ's work on earth; the ascension witnessed by the disciples at the Mount of Olives, which we celebrate today; and preceding that, the ascension to the cross, celebrated on Good Friday. This latter ascension our Lord made alone, deserted by almost all his followers, on another hill outside the city: on Calvary.

The second difference between Jesus's ascension and that of the prophets is this: unlike Elijah's ascension, which really concerned only one man, Christ's ascension was not a singular event. His two ascensions, both at Calvary and on the Mount of Olives, include and transform all people. Our Lord not only takes captivity captive, but he changes those bonds that enslaved us and makes them the bonds that bind us together, so that we might become Jesus's own body.

Before Christ 'ascended on high and made captivity itself a captive', he bestowed precious gifts upon his people. These gifts are various, and were given in a multitude of ways. Firstly, there was the gift of resurrection itself, shown to the women at the empty tomb; then the gift of understanding God's word, given to the disciples fleeing Jerusalem on their way to Emmaus; then the gift of peace, given to his frightened friends hiding behind the closed doors of the upper room; and finally the gift of calling, bestowed to a disillusioned band of disciples ready to trade in their apostleship for their old lives as fishermen on Lake Galilee. And, as you and I anticipate the feast of Pentecost, we look forward also to the gifts of the Spirit, as Paul says, 'some (to) be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the Saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4. 11-12).

Our Lord's first ascension on Calvary meant that the lives of his followers and friends could be set free from death and sin. His second ascension on the Mount of Olives brought them the promise of the Holy Spirit, who would strengthen and equip those who love him. That, surely, is the true gift of our Lord's ascensions: the gift of

people's lives, redeemed and renewed, bound together in the power of his resurrection to be the body of his resurrection on earth.

There may well be times when we feel like those 'men of Galilee', the people who watched Jesus ascend to glory on the Mount of Olives. There are times when we, like them, may feel left behind, full of sorrow and unresolved questions. It is at times like these that we need to understand that the angelic word spoken to them is also addressed to us: 'Why do you stand looking up towards 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).

It is my hope that you and I will come to experience in our lives, and nurture in ourselves, the same gifts that Christ bestowed to his friends in the time between his ascension on the cross and his ascension to the Father. It is my hope that by these gifts we may be equipped to teach to others the work of resurrection. And it is my prayer that we may be shaped into the body of Christ, 'joined and knitted together by every ligament ... building itself up in love' (Eph 4. 16), to make known this message to those around us that even today find themselves 'captives to captivity'.

Amen.