

WHAT THE IMAGE OF THE FEET MEANS

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.

The Feast of the Ascension obviously falls between the beginning of Easter season (which is Easter Sunday) and the conclusion of Eastertide on Pentecost Sunday. Perhaps it can seem to have a lower profile than Easter Sunday and Pentecost, because it falls in the middle. In that way, it suffers a ‘squeeze’. That, however, would be down to human perception, which can of course be faulty. The significance of the Ascension should not be underestimated, because it is crucial to our appreciation of the incarnation and the human hope for salvation.

The significance of the Ascension is fully appreciated in the world of art. Excellent examples of artistic renderings of the Ascension have been painted by Giotto, Mantegna, Perugino and by Rembrandt. Some Ascension art, however, can be absolutely awful (I think of the painting behind the altar of a church in a suburb of Paris where I used to preach); and some of it can be absolutely ‘underwhelming’. A German painting dating from the 16th century (I will not disclose the artist’s name) depicts the Ascension simply as a pair of ‘disappearing feet’; some of you may have seen similar examples portrayed on the ceilings of churches.

You are supposed to look up, see these feet sticking out of the ceiling, and realise that it is a portrayal of our Lord ascending. It probably works to some extent. Thankfully, more inspiring art helps us to conceive the human and divine Jesus going before us to his Father in heaven. He is going to the divine realm where he belongs, but depictions of his physical ascent remind us that he is human like us, and where he goes we can hope to follow.

Images of Christ's physical ascent serve as a final declaration of our Lord's humanity. Jesus has real physical presence, both in this world and in heaven. Christ ascended to heaven with his humanity, and not just his divinity. That means that our Lord is a *human being* who is already with the Father in heaven. There is a union of God and humanity in heaven. If one human being is in heaven, it is possible for others to be there too.

The Ascension of Jesus is the beginning of our salvation. Where Christ has gone, we will follow. Even the bad art works. All we need to do is follow the feet! Perhaps, however, the beauty and inspiration of good art is more likely to encourage us to make a leap of the imagination and grasp the divine realities.

Also, if the Ascension is about a real human person being with the Father in heaven, then it also reminds that in the incarnation of our Lord, God was present with us *here*. The Ascension marks the last appearance of Jesus among us. Perhaps those feet are supposed to remind us that he was really with us? The Feast of the Ascension provides us with reassurance on two fronts: yes, human beings really can be with the Father in heaven; and yes, God really was here with us.

The Ascension certainly seems to have reassured the apostles. Our text from St Luke tells us that they 'worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God'. Then they went out to the whole world and 'preached everywhere', confident that Christ was still with them, despite his physical departure. Our Lord promised the apostles and us that he would be with us always, and that he would send the Holy Spirit to witness to the truth.

Jesus's human body may be in heaven, but there is a sense in which his body continues here, and that is the body of Christ that is his Church. We make up the body of Christ and our Lord is present in our communion together. And the Holy

Spirit resides with us. So perhaps, in that pair of feet we can envisage humanity united with God in heaven, the divine Jesus who was with us here, and the Christ who continues to be present in our Church. If the image of the feet helps us appreciate all that, then they serve their purpose.

Could we have Easter, or even the entire Gospel message, without the Ascension? An argument can perhaps be made in favour, but it is more likely that the Ascension is a crucial part of Easter. On Easter Sunday we celebrate our Lord's resurrection and victory over sin and death. That doesn't finish the story, however. We need to know what *our part* of the salvation story is; and that is where the Ascension comes in. At the Ascension, the divine Jesus goes to be with his Father where he belongs; yet as he does this, he does not lose his humanity. If it is possible for the human Christ, then it is possible for us. Our Lord tells us he has 'gone before', implying that we are to follow. We belong where he is, too.

The efficacy of the incarnation does not end there, either. Once in heaven, Jesus is still a human being sitting next to his Father. He, the divine Son of God, is also a human being who prays for us. He sympathises with our weaknesses¹ and intercedes constantly for us² before the Father. When Christ ascended to heaven, he inherited his kingdom,³ the kingdom of peace and justice that he promised us. Not only is our Lord praying for us; we also have that kingdom to look forward to.⁴

Funnily enough, today we can rejoice in the image of the 'disappearing feet'. They remind us that the Ascension is a crucial part of our salvation hope. Amen.

¹ Cf. Heb 4. 15: 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, without sin'.

² Cf. Heb 7. 25: 'He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them'.

³ Cf. Jn 18. 36: 'Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world"'.

⁴ Cf. Mt 25. 34: 'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"'.