

The Ascension of the Lord – the Inconvenient Feast! Luke 24: 44-53

Is the Ascension of the Lord really an inconvenient feast?

A quotation:

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”

Col 3: 2

To understand this statement is to understand the Ascension of Christ, and why this feast is so important. This speech from the Letter to the Colossians, to my mind, is essential for followers of Christ to understand, as it defines who we are, as well as our principles of action. To use a Latin term one might say that it is our *sine qua non*¹. If we see our Colossian text in its scriptural context:

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Col 3:1

we can begin to understand its Ascension context. If we then add:

“...for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.” Col 3:3

and recalling Psalm 110 *“The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand”* we begin to see the fulfilling of scripture. This is particularly important, as Jesus, referred to this before His Passion, in the Temple. He had insinuated that the Messiah, the son of David, was in fact the Lord seated at the right hand of God (Mark 12: 35-37 and parallels). The apostles would have remembered this after the resurrection and understood this as a prophesy. Psalm 110 describes why the risen Lord ceased to appear to them, and rose into heaven.



In church we are used to talking about the Passion, the Cross, Jesus’ Resurrection, but we seem to have forgotten the Ascension. In the New Testament one could say that the Ascension of Jesus was just a convenient way to explain why the resurrection appearances ended! Could it be that Holy Church doesn’t understand certain texts of the New Testament? Could the Letter to the Hebrews enlighten us?

¹ An indispensable, action or ingredient. Without which [there is] nothing.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sine_qua_non

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In the following passage we hear the difference in our relationship with the God of the Old Testament, and that of the New Testament:

18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.'²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.') ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.²

In verses 18 to 21 there is an atmosphere and darkness that would cause fear. At the end of verse 21 we realise that the author is describing the theophany to Moses, on Mount Sinai. How different verses 22-24 are. They talk of the heavenly Jerusalem. There are angels: Jesus is mentioned. There is no numbing oppressive atmosphere. We find a calm situation, rich in personal relationship. All is well! Contained within the latter part of this text is the ascended Jesus with God. There is talk of the New Covenant – the Covenant of Love. We will recall the washing of the disciples feet, in John's Gospel,³ and how this gives us an example of God's Love. How we should care for others. Jesus' Passion proves how far God will go for you and I. The old world order of Cain and Abel is now no more. The 'new world' is one of Hope! Love! Empowerment!

In the story of the women at the tomb on Easter Sunday, in John's gospel, we encounter fear and incomprehension, at first hand. However, this situation can be changed when we view it through the lens of the Ascension. Suddenly, Heaven is laid open. The risen victim, Jesus, rises and is seated at the right hand of God. We now see a God who rescues. Who empowers us to focus our minds on the things that are above. We have been shown how to think like God. So we return to the Letter to the Colossians...

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything

² Hebrews 12: 18-24

³ John 13: 1-17

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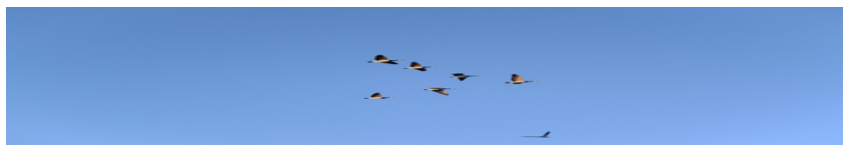
together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.⁴



The letter describes the actions of God, and these are to become our actions! Jesus has led 'the Way'. We are invited to follow! I am reminded of the famous Holman Hunt painting, 'The Light of the World' that hangs in Keble College, Oxford.

Here we see Jesus knocking at the door, so that we might be let into the kingdom of heaven (Rev 3: 20). God is not the avenging God of the Old Testament. Rather, He is the forgiving victim. After all the human race inflicted on Him - God's Way is to forgive. So, He knocks at your door. Will you hear? Could the problem possibly be that Jesus knocks, at the door when we least expect Him? Perhaps it is the door that we would least like Him to appear at? Oh, the shame! The embarrassment! To have to admit to God's Son, that we are who we are. Jesus see us in all our vulnerability, and shame. He invites us in. He accepts us!

The Book of Revelation reminds us that Jesus promised He will return. As followers of Christ in the season of Advent, we pray *maranatha* – come Lord! Our Christian Hope dares us to ask for the presence of the forgiving victim. We want to be invited to the heavenly banquet. We can see this pattern repeated in our prayers, and our Liturgy. It takes place every time we make *Eucharist*. Through our worship, we seek the ways that the Sacraments and signs make Christ present to us. Now, because of Jesus' Ascension, all this lies open to us. We must now Wait! Wait, for the coming of the Spirit to inflame us. There is no need to be afraid. We must 'set our minds on the things that are above, not on the things of the earth'.



⁴ Colossians 3: 12-17