

The Ascension of the Lord 2021



Here we have a traditional image of the Ascension of Jesus by John Singleton Copely (1775).

Men of Galilee, why gaze in wonder at the heavens? This Jesus whom you saw ascending into heaven will return as you saw Him go. Alleluia¹

In Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives stands a small domed shrine. It is the Chapel of the Ascension where the last remaining footprint of Jesus' earthly life is kept. It is kept in a dark damp interior, and it is said that it is from precisely this spot that Jesus literally sprang up into heaven. You could almost imagine that He sprang with such vigour that He compressed the rock under his feet! In this age of telescopes and space probes I wonder if the Ascension of the Lord is something of an embarrassment to modern humanity? In our post-modern age we have faith in the most outlandish scientific concepts such as black holes in space and viruses with little 'horns' that lock on to cells in our body. All of which make the pre-scientific doctrine of the Ascension appear a little fanciful.

We as modern, possibly Orthodox, people of Faith will know that the Ascension of the Lord is essential to our Faith. Without the Ascension of Jesus, the Resurrection would be meaningless. Jesus had to be taken into heaven so that we could receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the Church born. Quite simply, if Jesus had not returned to His Father in heaven, He would have been just human like you and me. I think St.

¹ Acts 1: 11

The Ascension of the Lord 2021

Augustine of Hippo in *Sermon 261* comes to our aid when he preached, on this feast day:

*The resurrection of the Lord is our hope; the Ascension of the Lord is our exaltation... Although He descended without a body, He ascended with a body and with us who are destined to ascend, not by reason of our own virtue, but on account of our oneness with Him.*²

This is our great hope and is something that gives mourners great comfort. Faith gives us permission to know that we will meet our loved ones again. For those of no faith there is just oblivion and the surprise of their lives when they pass from this life, to the next!

The question we should consider tonight is what sort of 'footprint' will you and I leave on earth when we are taken up into heaven?

(Pause)

We only need to recall Jesus' deeds: healing, forgiving, teaching, casting out demons, feeding people spiritually and physically, making disciples... to understand His ministry. What are the fruits of your ministry? We should take time to consider this...

Perhaps we should now move to more mystical grounds and consider Jesus' Presence in His Absence!



This mystery maybe easier to understand through the template of Elisha receiving Elijah's mantle in 2 Kings 2: 1-17. In this account Elisha can only receive Elijah's mantle if he witnesses Elijah being taken up into heaven. In the same way the Venerable Bede writes 'only those who

² Sermon 261 p. 36, Ascension Theology, Douglas Farrow, Bloomsbury

The Ascension of the Lord 2021

'see' Jesus ascend are ready to receive the gifts of the Sacraments. The Sacraments of the Church are like the miracle-working mantle that Elijah left behind. In celebrating the Eucharist, the Church professes to know how the divine presents itself in our time. The Church becomes with Jesus a community of ascensions and oblation, sharing in His heavenly offering to the Father, and manifesting the Spirit who reorganises 'created reality' around Him. It is in making Eucharist that the Church's identity is properly established and the condition for the possibility of the other sacraments to be conceived.

There are three points to make:

- The ascension is seen as the absence of Christ. Whereas the Eucharist joins you and I to Jesus through our joint histories in the communion of our bodies and souls. It therefore allows us in this present age to be united with Christ.
- The Eucharist which is left behind by Christ as a witness to the world. Reorders the entire Cosmos to God in Christ. This is explained in the Letter to the Ephesians:

remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... In him, and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence.³

- Finally, the Eucharist is left behind as the means of participation in the offering that Christ in his ascension presents to the Father – Himself and the people whose redemption he has won. The eucharist can be seen as the

³ Ephesians 2: 12-13; 3: 12

The Ascension of the Lord 2021

earthly remains of Jesus' sacrifice and a glimpse of the heavenly glory that is to come.

All of this is present this evening, in our worship and Eucharist. Our lives, through the communion we make tonight, are inextricably linked to Jesus. Heaven is opened up and waiting for us.

Let us pray:

Father in heaven, our minds were prepared for the coming of your kingdom when you took Christ beyond our sight so that we might seek him in his glory, for he is Lord forever. Amen.