

Sunday 12 May 2024, The Sunday after Ascension, Choral Matins
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On Thursday the Church marked the Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord. This feast almost always falls on a weekday which, in our busy urban culture, means that we often miss celebrating it on the day, transferring it to the following Sunday. What we miss in doing this is the rhythm of the liturgical year which places the Ascension exactly forty days after Easter, with Pentecost to follow ten days later. The period of feasting between Easter and Ascension may be seen as a counterbalance to the period of penitence which the forty days of Lent represent.

It isn't my intention this morning to lecture you on the complexities of the liturgical calendar, but it is worth reflecting on the way in which the Church understands time to operate. Within every year there is a rhythm of fast and feast, centred on the central events of redemption in Christ Jesus. We prepare ourselves for Easter by depriving ourselves in Lent. We prepare ourselves for Christmas by more solemn worship in Advent. In this way, the rhythm of the Christian year reflects on a grand scale the rhythm we undertake at each eucharist- indeed at every service of Matins- by beginning with penitence and progressing to praise and thanksgiving.

Scholars of liturgy reflect that these rhythms reinforce in us a sense of our place before God: unworthy humanity must be cleansed or purged before it can enter the presence of perfectly holy divinity. We abase ourselves before we are exalted to the heights of the heavenly court. In fact, it has been argued that postures like kneeling for confession reflect the courtly movements of obeisance enacted before an oriental potentate. We come as humble servants to beseech the king for his favours- and are surprised to find ourselves exalted to his right hand. We are granted more than we had asked of the king, and more than we deserve.

The Ascension of Christ is perhaps the most obvious moment of human exaltation in the entirety of the scriptures. When Jesus passes from his disciples' view, he passes in his human body beyond the borders of this world into the realm of heaven, symbolically 'up there', but really more 'beyond' than any material description could capture. His rising into the clouds is what we might call a divine condescension to the intellectual weakness of his audience. We know that above the clouds is space, satellites, and stars. To the disciples, above the clouds was heaven.

But that Christ ascends to heaven is the truth and it is a truth too that he ascends in his human body. Admittedly, his post-resurrection body was not quite like our own bodies- it could be touched and embraced, and it could also pass through locked doors. But that body was really and truly human and so at the ascension the human goes where it had never gone before. This is a dramatic shift. The wondering disciples, once they had regained their wits, perhaps reflected on the taking up of Elijah- 'my God is the Lord'- into heaven in a chariot of fire, but his ascent was not under his own power. He was, rightly understood, 'taken up' by God. Jesus, by

contrast, takes himself up. He returns to the place from whence he came and to a position that is his by right. With him he takes embodied humanity.

The pattern we enact in our liturgical worship and in our Church year is one of humble approach and undeserved glorification. The pattern of Christ's life is one of undeserved humiliation and humble glorification. We are, one might like to think, mirroring the life of Christ as we live out our Christian lives in community, shaped by the liturgical seasons and the weekly liturgy itself. And, like a mirror, we reflect in reverse what we see of Christ. His humble birth was for him- the one through whom the worlds were made- a complete humiliation. Having set aside his royal prerogatives, the one who breathed life into dust became that very dust in his mother's womb. At his ascension, Christ returns to the glory that is rightfully his.

Our rightful place is on our knees before the king of glory. And yet, when we approach him, we are not only forgiven but we are elevated to his right hand. We receive what we do not deserve and could not possibly merit, and this happens because of what happened to Jesus. His humiliation guarantees our exaltation, and his exaltation in our flesh calls for our humble gratitude. You'll forgive me making you dizzy with all this up-and-down talk, but what I hope you can see is that the ascension is a far more important feast than we often make of it.

In his ascension, Jesus accomplishes for us something new, something that had never been done before. As the writer to the Hebrews- my favourite book of the bible- puts it:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high: Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

Christ our Lord, having ascended into the heavens, obtains for us an inheritance: forever forgiveness and eternal glory. No oriental potentate could grant such a boon, no matter the humble approach. No one else was fitted to the task of raising humanity to heaven than the Son who became man himself. Without his ascension we remain simply penitents on our knees. Because of his ascension we sit secure, because Christ sits secure at the right hand of the Father. He has ascended, to descend only once again at the end of all things in judgment. So we wait eagerly for his return, repeating the cycle of the year and the cycle of our worship. It is the most important thing we can do, for in it we find the true meaning of life, our identity, and humanity's purpose: to glorify God in Jesus Christ, and to enjoy him forever in heaven. Amen.