

All Saints Kings Heath – 25 May 2017 (Ascension Day)

Easter lasts for fifty days, fifty days for the paschal candle, fifty days for Alleluias, the fifty days from Easter Day to Pentecost. Fifty days, but with a change of tone today, at the forty day mark.

This way of spinning out the celebration of Easter, with Easter Day at the beginning, Ascension Day in the middle, and Pentecost or Whitsunday at the end – it comes from the way Luke tells the story in the Acts of the Apostles. We heard it a few minutes ago. First comes Easter Day, then forty days during which Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure from their sight, then his ascension into heaven, and finally, on the fiftieth day, the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and flames of fire

The Gospels tell the story in different ways. Matthew, for instance, has an alternative ascension story, not on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem, but in Galilee. And John wraps it all up in one day, with the gift of the Holy Spirit on the evening of the day of resurrection, when Jesus appears among his disciples, breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Even Luke, at the end of his Gospel, tells the story differently from the way he tells it in Acts. Not spread out over six or seven weeks, but all in one long day. The story begins early in the morning with the women and the angels at the tomb. Then there are the two disciples who walk to Emmaus with Jesus as their unrecognised companion. After their eyes are opened, they walk back to Jerusalem and join the rest of the disciples. Then Jesus himself appears in their midst. He opens their minds to the meaning of all that has happened. He tells them that they are to be his witnesses and to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then he leads them out to the mount of Olives and is taken from their sight. All in one day.

Why did Luke change the way he told the story between the time he wrote his Gospel and his writing of the Acts of the Apostles? And why does the Church follow him in the way we spread out our celebration of Easter, with separate days for resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit? Why not do it all in one day like the Gospel of John?

What Luke has done is give us the story in a way that helps us to look at the one mystery from different angles, one by one, like a prism or a faceted diamond. So, as well as contemplating the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection as a whole, we can also focus our attention on its different aspects – the death of Jesus, his rising from the dead, his return to his Father, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can look at them one by one, each shining with a different colour of the one light.

So what about the ascension of Jesus? I've had a look at some of the sermons preached on Ascension Day sixteen hundred years ago by the great Augustine, who was bishop of the city of Hippo in what is now Algeria.

Again and again Augustine builds on a text that is still familiar – not a text from the Bible but a text from the liturgy. In Latin *Sursum Corda*. In English “Lift up your hearts.” That's what the priest says, and we reply. “We lift them to the Lord.” Augustine links these words to what St Paul has to say: “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above (same word, *sursum* in Latin) where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.”¹ *Sursum Corda* – “Lift up your hearts.”

Notice the link with the prayer for Ascension Day that we have already used – I quote it as it comes in the old Prayer Book:

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God,
that like as we believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ
to have ascended into the heavens;
so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend
and with him continually dwell.

If we belong to Jesus, one body with him, then we belong where he is, with his Father in heaven. As Paul himself says in another of his letters, “Our citizenship is in

¹ Colossians 3:1f.

heaven.”² Our bodies are still on earth. But our hearts belong in heaven. Heaven is our true home.

And yet we know very well that we are still living among the pains, the trials, the temptations and, yes, the horrors of this world. But we also know by faith that, although the Lord Jesus Christ has been taken from our sight, he is still with us.

In his sermons Augustine makes a great deal of the fact that, because we are one body with Christ, we are indeed one with him in heaven, while he is still with us on earth. As long as this world lasts, our trials are his. Our trials are his trials, as his triumphs are ours. Here is a little bit of one of Augustine’s sermons:

Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” and when he said: “I was hungry and you gave me food.”... While in heaven he is also with us; and while on earth we are with him.³

Heaven and earth aren’t different places, as if by becoming one of us on earth Jesus had to leave his place at his Father’s side. Yes, he humbled himself, as St Paul says, but (despite the words of the hymn) he did not leave his throne and his kingly crown, as if his coming to earth left some vacancy in heaven.

What Jesus shows us on the cross is precisely the nature of God’s abiding rule. God rules the world, not with force or the fear of violence, but with gentleness, truth, forgiveness and justice. Jesus lived the life of heaven on earth, and if we can learn to live that life with him, with our hearts in heaven with him, then that is how Christ will exercise his kingly rule through us. His kingly rule is no less the rule of God for being hidden. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus are not the reversal of the cross but the unveiling of its power.

² Philippians 3:20

³ Augustine, *Sermo de Ascensione Domini*, Mai xviii. Translation from Robert Atwell, *Celebrating the Seasons* (Norwich 1999) p.275

Let us stay for a moment with the language of unveiling. Luke, like the creeds, makes much of the language of up and down, of ascent and descent. Language like that can encourage us to think that heaven and earth are indeed different places – heaven up there and earth down here.

But that's not the only language we can use. There is also the language of unveiling or revelation. A veil is removed from our eyes, or our ears are unblocked, so that we can see or hear things that were there all the time but were hidden from us, or so that we see or hear familiar things in a new way.

Does Jesus pass through a veil into the presence of his Father, or are the eyes of his disciples opened once more, but for always, as they were for a moment on the mountain of Christ's transfiguration? If God is always present, closer to us than we are to ourselves, what does it mean for us to say that Jesus has passed into the presence of his Father? It can only mean that Jesus himself is now closer to us than we are to ourselves. The question for us is not, "How can he be closer to us?" but "How can we be closer to him?" The answer is "*Sursum Corda* - "Lift up your hearts."

Which brings us back to where we are. In a few minutes time we'll hear those words for ourselves, here in this Eucharist. The whole mystery of Christ is present in every Eucharist - his birth, his sharing of our flesh and blood; his passion and death; his rising from the dead and his living presence among us; the gift of the Holy Spirit to transform bread and wine to eat and drink so that we may be transformed, body and soul, into a living sacrifice to God.

And today we have the Lord's ascension. "Lift up your hearts," the priest will say, and we'll lift them up to the Lord. We'll be standing on the Mount of Olives with the apostles and with Mary the Mother of the Lord. The veil will be rent, and we'll find ourselves in the company of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven in the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Here, at the altar, the Lord is with us on earth and we are with him in heaven.