

⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Acts 1

Ascension Reflection

This will be a shorter reflection and we have the gift of Alain-Michel’s wonderful sermon to reflect on.

I wanted to briefly consider the Ascension, though I won’t consider the physical mechanics of how exactly Jesus ascended to be with the Father (the scriptures say remarkably little on that, as I don’t think that is supposed to be the focus of our attention!).

Right at the outset of our scriptures, at each stage of Creation we see an artist, God as Creator who is pleased with their handiwork, declaring it to be ‘good’ and when humanity is created, ‘very good’. We were created to have relationship with God, pictured most graphically for me in God walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day – I love that image on every level. Adam and Eve were naked – they did not need to hide who they were before each other or God.

Then comes the Fall, which results in a whole bunch of (unintended) consequences – Adam and Eve hid from God, covered their nakedness (*did they experience shame, by any chance?*), fell out with each other and the whole of Creation was cursed, bringing death into it. Speed through the rest of our Old Testament to the birth, death, resurrection of Jesus and we arrive at....the Ascension (*hope you did not have whip lash on the way through!*).

The importance of the Ascension is not how it happened but that it happened. Artwork and certain church practices reinforce the idea that God is ‘up there’....when the Ascension brings together heaven and earth. Jesus, carrying the wounds of crucifixion in his body and until this point bound by time and space, goes to the Father, meaning the Holy Spirit can come who is not limited to time or space.

Richard Rohr, in an email reflection on the Cosmic Christ in 2016, said:

In the story of Christ’s ascension as told in Acts (1:9-11), angels appear next to the disciples as they gaze after the rising figure. The angels ask, “Why are you standing here staring up into heaven?” Most of Christianity has been doing just that, straining to find the historical Jesus “up there.” Where did he go? We’ve been obsessed with the question because we think the universe is divided into separate levels—heaven and earth. But it is one universe and all within it is transmuted and transformed by the glory of God. The whole point of the Incarnation and Risen Body is that the Christ is here—and always was! But now we have a story that allows us to imagine it just might be true.

Jesus didn't go anywhere. He became the universal omnipresent Body of Christ. That's why the final book of the Bible promises us a new heaven and a new earth. (Revelation 21:1), not an escape from earth. We focused on "going" to heaven instead of living on earth as Jesus did—which makes heaven and earth one. It is heaven all the way to heaven. What you choose now is exactly what you choose to be forever. God will not disappoint you.

Jesus promised that the disciples would receive the Holy Spirit 'not many days from now'. Other accounts from Mark and Luke suggest that they blessed the people in between these days but it was also a time of prayer. Not in some bored, distracted way (we may be feeling that ourselves during this pandemic) but in a focused way. Perhaps here I cite Thomas Merton who speaks to this through the practices that I introduced previously – solitude and silence.

"Tomorrow is the Ascension, my favourite feast... It is the feast of silence and interior solitude when we go up to live in heaven with Jesus: for He takes us there, after He has lived a little while on earth among us. That is the grace of Ascension day: to be taken up into the heaven of our own souls, the apex mentis, the point of immediate contact with God. To rest on this quiet peak, in the darkness that surrounds God. To live there through all trials and all business with the 'Tranquillus Deus Tranquillans omnia' ('the tranquil God who makes all things tranquil - St Bernard)."

Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*

And finally, something from Henri Nouwen, which may be helpful:

Waiting is essential to the spiritual life. But waiting as a disciple of Jesus is not an empty waiting. It is a waiting with a promise in our hearts that makes already present what we are waiting for. We wait during Advent for the birth of Jesus. We wait after Easter for the coming of the Spirit, and after the ascension of Jesus we wait for his coming again in glory. We are always waiting, but it is a waiting in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps.

I hope this and Alain-Michel's sermon will provide food to nourish you this week – next week will look at Pentecost and the Holy Spirit.