

Ascension Day

Acts 1.1-11

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

The Ascension of Jesus

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'

What's going on?

This is the story of Jesus' Ascension (going up) into heaven. This is also the beginning of the book of Acts in the New Testament, telling the story of what Jesus' followers did after his resurrection and ascension. The point at which this story opens is after Jesus has been raised from the dead and has appeared to the disciples, so that 'by many convincing proofs' they know that he is alive even after his crucifixion and death. Jesus tells them that he will not be present among them for much longer but that the Holy Spirit will be with them and guide their actions. The disciples have a job to do: to witness to what Jesus told them about God throughout the whole world. When he has laid this commission upon them, Jesus disappears from their sight. It is explained to them that Jesus has been taken into heaven and that one day he will return in the same way. As in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection, the visionary character event is overwhelming and amazing and has to be explained to the people witnessing it so that they understand what they are seeing.

Daniel 7.9-14

Judgement before the Ancient One

**As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousand served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgement,
and the books were opened.
I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn**

was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

What's going on?

This alternative first reading for Ascension Day comes from the Old Testament book of Daniel. Again this is a powerful vision of a heavenly event and can be understood as an allegory. The 'Ancient One' is like God sitting on a fiery throne and with the power of judgement. Evil in the form of the beast is overcome and the power of evil (or death) is taken away. A redeeming figure 'like a human being' is presented before the Ancient One and given power, glory and kingship. He is worthy of service and worship. We can use this vision in Daniel to imagine how Jesus returned to heaven, having overcome death through his resurrection and how he is reunited with God the Father. The Ascension can be a difficult matter to grasp, even the disciples couldn't understand what it was about at first and so this vision can help us make sense of it.

Psalm 47

God's Rule over the Nations

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.
Clap your hands, all you peoples;

shout to God with loud songs of joy.
For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.
He subdued peoples under us,
and nations under our feet.
He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom he loves.

Selah

God has gone up with a shout,
the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the king of all the earth;
sing praises with a psalm.

God is king over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.
The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted.

What's going on?

This psalm brings together some of the things we try to think about on Ascension Day. It is a song to accompany the ceremonial procession at the Temple, but its language reminds us that Jesus has 'gone up' to heaven and that we should respond with praise for all that God did in and through him. We also believe that Jesus takes his place in heaven, having completed his work restoring the relationship between human beings and God as is envisaged in the last verse of the psalm.

Psalm 93

The Majesty of God's Rule

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;

**the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.**

**The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.
More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!**

**Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, for evermore.**

What's going on?

This psalm also reminds us of the majesty of God and the way earth relates to heaven. After Jesus' Ascension he is reunited with the Father and shares his divine life and we have to imagine what that is like as Jesus returns to the Father. Jesus enters into the majesty that is envisaged here and we can imagine something of God's eternal plan for the Creation faithfully working itself out, with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection at the heart of it.

Ephesians 1.15-23

Paul's Prayer

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from

the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

What's going on?

St Paul explains to his friends at Ephesus that God raised Jesus from the dead and also took him back to heaven. His work on earth done, Jesus assumes the right to all power, glory and majesty, for he is God. Now then we can relate to Jesus in yet another way, as part of the divine life who rules the universe and as a manifestation of divine power. It is difficult to think of this in terms of an abstract 'God', but if we imagine it as a homecoming of Jesus, who was a human being, returning to the Father and being given welcome and invitation to sit at God's right hand, then we can begin to make sense of what happened at the Ascension. So, say St Paul, we need a 'spirit of wisdom and revelation' to understand what it means. Because, just as Jesus returned to God to welcome and uplifting by the Father, so can we hope for the same thing when we die.

Luke 24.44-53

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

The Ascension of Jesus

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried

up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

What's going on?

This is a gospel description of what happened at the Ascension. Jesus gives his friends and followers tasks: to understand the meaning of the scriptures and to see his own life as fulfilment of what the scriptures tell human beings about God's plan for them. The disciples then are to understand themselves as actual witnesses to this fulfilling work of Jesus and are to receive the Holy Spirit for the next phase of their task. Jesus leaves them with his blessing and is taken to heaven. They are filled with joy and return to Jerusalem to worship and to praise God.