

**THE POWER & PRESENCE OF THE ASCENDED LORD**

*I shall not leave you orphans; I shall come to you. In a short time the world will no longer see me; but you will see that I live and you also will live. On that day, you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you. (John 14:18-20)*

Jesus may have used these words in the context of his Passover from earthly life through death and into resurrection. But they strike me as also very relevant to his passage to his Father through the Ascension and the gift of his presence in the church by his Spirit that was poured out 9 days later. Indeed, this may have been in the mind of John too who, when he put his Gospel together, skilfully allowed the ongoing resurrection–ascension reality of Jesus in the Church to bring its light to bear on a fuller understanding of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Whether or not this is the case, it is true that we often tend to feel rather like orphans after we celebrate the Ascension. We might feel happy for Jesus – who is seen as ‘going home’ - but not for ourselves. We feel abandoned, bereft – as though a death has occurred. (These tones are quite often picked up in sermons on Ascension Day). However, this is to fail to see what lies at the heart of the Ascension. When the apostles were asked by the angel at the time of the Ascension itself ‘Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? (Acts 1:11)’ one wonders if it is not a gentle challenge and rebuke from an angel who knows they too are struggling to get the point. So what is the point?

We are inclined to think of the Resurrection and then the Ascension of Jesus as meaning his life got more spiritual and as a result much less interested in or involved with the material world and even with human life. Yes, Jesus (God-made-man) does enter into a new and more powerful Spiritual reality and ministry – as St Paul says he becomes a life-giving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45)- but, no, that does not cut him off from human life or the material creation. Rather he takes all this human and material creation with him into this new spiritual reality. Matter and human flesh is not destroyed or annulled but transformed and made glorious by God’s action. More so than before! Jesus is the beginning of a new humanity – a second Adam (the old nature he took from the first Adam having died on the cross) and head of a new creation (Ephesians 1:10). Nonetheless this is a transformation of what was already made: the tomb really was empty on Easter Sunday and the Risen Lord is still the son of Mary.

*Ascended to be High Priest and King forever*

The Resurrection begins this new life and creation. The Ascension takes this new life into yet another phase. It takes the human reality – now glorified – into the intimate presence of God for the first time. Heaven is where God dwells, where God is most fully himself ‘in light inaccessible’ – hid from our eyes, so glorious and awesome is it. It is scarcely possible for anything created to live there – except by grace and divine favour. The Son of God who has in a sense never left Heaven but has also come down to earth now returns as the head and representative and source of a new humanity. In a sense this changes Heaven forever too. Jesus fashions a whole new reality in Heaven, building a temple there – being a temple there (cf Rev 21:22). To use the Jewish imagery from Hebrews, he enters the heavenly sanctuary and not just the temple but the Holy of Holies and as our great High Priest intercedes for us. As priest he offers sacrifice (cf Heb 8:3), the gift of his whole and perfect being and life, the complete obedience and love of the Eternal Son to and for the Eternal Father, one ceaseless perfect act. Unlike Aaronic priests, he can remain there, opening up this access to us too

through and in him, thus making the earthly outer temple courts unnecessary. Humanity now lives in communion with God face to face. This is the vision of worship in Heaven with all creation gathered around the throne of the lamb once slain who lives forever (Rev 5:6-14).

In the power of his priestly offering he intercedes for us as our one perfect mediator with the Father. In this he obtains all grace for us -and in this and through this he reigns. Thus he sits next to his Father, enthroned. He rules a kingdom that cannot end and not be destroyed (Rev 15:3-4). This new humanity, begun and contained in Jesus, has not sneaked into Heaven and been put in a corner out of the way but, in Jesus is ruling, sat at the right hand of his Father.

The Ascension is for our benefit – it is better if Jesus goes away as he said (John 16:7). Taking humanity and with it the earth (of which humankind is the steward) up into Heaven, Jesus also brings Heaven and God down to humanity and earth in a new and powerful way too. The two are more closely connected than ever before – in a new covenant. This is what Pentecost is all about. The Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus, the life and power and love of the Father, is poured into our hearts of stone, making them come alive, writing his law on them (Jeremiah 31:31-34 – & compare with the covenant on Mt Sinai).

*Praying that the Significance of the Ascension may be grasped*

This is a lot to take in but it is important that we do. Paul knew it was difficult to grasp but that it was vital. That is what he stressed it to the Ephesians, praying for them too. We could do no better than make his prayer our own. ‘May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can know what hope his call holds for you, how rich are the glories of his inheritance amongst his holy people, and how incomparably great is the power that he has exercised for us believers. This accords with the strength of his power at work in Christ, the power which he exercised in raising him from the dead and enthroning him at his right hand in heaven, far above every principality, ruling force, power or sovereignty, or any title that can be named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him, as he is above all things, the head of the Church, which is his Body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:17-23)’

*Sharing and working in the power of the Ascended Lord*

He is *our* High priest and *our* king. He carries out these functions for us and also through us. Born again from above, we are his body on earth, we are being formed into the true temple in him. Thus the new humanity is formed. We are to be increasingly transformed into him, from glory into glory, and seek to bring others, society, culture and the whole earth more into the transformation that God intends for them. In this more of Heaven is brought to earth – or earth caught up into Heaven. In this we see and experience the power of Christ’s Ascension – as Priest and King; in this we see that we have not been left orphans but that Jesus is in the Father and also in us.

Is not the Ascension then vital for evangelisation? Jesus told the apostles to go to all the nations, teaching and baptising. This is possible because he also told them he had all authority in heaven and earth and would be with them to the end of time (Matthew 28:19). So the command and resources for mission are founded on the Ascension. It makes it possible and guarantees its fruitfulness. So let us seek a deepening appreciation and share in the power of the Ascended Lord.

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