

6. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

'So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.' Thus the earliest gospel, written by St. Mark, records the Ascension and so we believe.

Christ's body was glorified at the moment of his resurrection, physically giving him new and supernatural powers that, that same body, subsequently and permanently enjoys, says the new catechism. During the 40 days after his resurrection, when he eats and drinks in an everyday manner and teaches the disciples about the kingdom, his future glory, as yet, remains hidden under the appearance of his ordinary humanity – how else were they to recognise him?

Jesus' final appearance, as he is about to leave the disciples, ends with the irreversible change from his humanity to his divine glory, this is symbolised by the cloud and his ascending physically into heaven before their eyes; so the faith teaches and so we believe – and from that time forward, he is, we say in the creed, 'seated at the right hand of the Father'.

Jesus himself spoke of his Ascension prior to the event, and the fact that his glory is still not revealed even after he has risen from the dead. He says to Mary Magdalene, and John records it in his Gospel, 'I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God'. There is then a difference between the glory of the resurrection and the glory of the risen Christ who is exalted to the Father's right hand. It is the Ascension that marks this transition in a very real and dramatic way.

John Macquarrie speaks of the Ascension as a purely mythical event, reflecting a cosmology that has long since been abandoned, he may be right, and yet, he says 'as a symbol intended to tell us who Jesus Christ is, it is an appropriate culmination of the story'. Christ's lifting up in a cloud, the symbol of divine presence, suggesting both that he has become the exalted Lord in the minds of the disciples, the Christ of Faith, at one with the Father, symbolic too that his life has been received by God (like the smoke of ancient sacrifice). The Ascension, he concludes, is the final symbol in the series of 'mysteries' by which the evangelists seek to portray the man Jesus of Nazareth, as revealer of God's truth and the Christ of Faith.

The church takes up this good news in her proclamation, her *kerygma* that Jesus is exalted Lord, links the final stage in his earthly life, the Ascension, back to the first stage – his descent from heaven in the Incarnation. Two sides of the one event, his humility, the baby born at Bethlehem, and his exaltation, 'lifted up from our sight'. The truth these mysteries reveal are contained in the words of St. John, in his gospel when he says, only the one who 'comes from the Father' can return to the Father. So John continues, 'No one has ascended to heaven, but he who descended from heaven, the son of man.' Left to nature, humanity, individual human beings, do not have access to Heaven. Yet because Jesus has done this faith tells us that the gate to heaven is now open – we too can enter, through faith in Jesus, by our incorporation of his Body here on earth, Holy Church. As the preface for the Ascension puts it, in the missal, 'where he is gone we hope to follow,'.... 'taken up to heaven in the sight' of the Apostles, 'to claim for us a share in his divine life.'

The Ascension actually begins with the Cross, Jesus said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' His being lifted up on the cross, is the beginning his final ascent, for John in his gospel, the cross is the moment of victory, as Jesus proclaims 'it is accomplished'. Here on the cross, Benedict says in *I believe* 'we see Jesus' divinity disfigured, stripped of all visible glory', yet as next Sunday's gospel reminds us, the good thief sees Jesus for who he really is, a King and entrusts he himself to Jesus as such. The thief believes what is written on the tablet over Jesus' head, 'The King of the Jews'. For St. John, for Benedict and all faithful Christians, the Cross is a throne, and in the 'today' of God, the thief is immediately granted paradise by the King. As a King he is given the power to reconcile to himself 'all things', not just the thief, but us and everything, 'whether on earth or in heaven,' writes St. Paul to the Colossians. So when all is accomplished, Jesus ascends into heaven, the 'priest of the new and eternal covenant, entering 'into a

sanctuary, not made by human hands... but into heaven itself..., to appear in the presence of God, on our behalf so writes the author of the letter to the Hebrews.

There 'our great high priest who has passed into the Heavens', continually pleads for us and makes intercession for us and all humanity. As 'high priest of the good things to come', he is the principal celebrant of the heavenly liturgy celebrated in honour of the Father, a liturgy that anticipate and share in, every time mass is celebrated, when Jesus offers himself as both priest and victim here on the altar.

So why do we say 'he is seated at the right hand of the Father, if he is so busy on our behalf. At the right hand, signifies the glory and honour of Our Lord's divinity, where else would we expect him to be placed – he who existed before all ages, Son of God, of one being with the Father. And so seated at the right hand of the Father he reigns. Seated as he is, signifies the inauguration of his messianic Kingdom – the fulfillment of the prophet Daniel's vision of the son of man – to whom is given 'dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him'... a kingdom that can not pass away or be destroyed... the kingdom we proclaim in the creed that 'will have no end' !

Our Lord's position in heaven has a further implication, for as well as his kingdom having 'no end', he is to judge the living and the dead. Jesus ascension marks his becoming our exalted Lord and as such he possesses 'all power in heaven and earth' writes St. Paul, for the Father has, he continues, 'put all things under his feet', Lord of the cosmos and Lord of history, not only reigning from heaven, at the right hand of the Father, present with us too, as head of the church, his body here on earth, making visible (that Kingdom that we will celebrate next Sunday, in the beautiful feast of Christ the King) which brings the Church's year to a close. The reminder that that kingdom that 'shall have no end' is already present in mystery. The Ascension into heaven sets God's plan for creation into its final phase, so it is that we now already live in the last hour, the final age of the world is irrevocably underway! We aren't quite there, and as the Church we continue to work to establish his kingly rule, that kingdom of justice, love and peace. NOW is the time of the spirit, the time for witness, it is also a time still marked by 'distress' and trials which the Church can not avoid. We go on, sure in our hope that Christ's coming in glory is imminent – even if 2,000 years does seem a long wait! But it could be any time as we will be reminding ourselves throughout the Advent Season. That glorious coming is delayed, suspended at every moment in history until the exact moment of God's choosing!

We are taught by scripture that before that moment the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers, there will be persecution, many will be deceived – the anti-Christ – man's glorification of himself in place of God and his Messiah! The Book of Revelation tells us that the Church will only enter into the full glory of the Kingdom after this final struggle, a final Passover! God and his Christ and Holy Church will be triumphant and this triumph will bring about the last and final day – after all the cosmic upheaval that will occur! It all gets a bit scary if we take the Book of Revelation seriously – so may be this coming Advent is a time to pull our socks up after all, all the signs are that the world goes on getting worse and worse, with real evil ruining the lives of many.

And on that last day there will be the final judgment, the living and the dead will all be judged, that moment when, as Jesus taught, the conduct of each one and the secrets of all hearts will be brought to light. On that day Jesus will truly be judge of the living and the dead as we proclaim Sunday by Sunday in our creed. It is on that final day that our acceptance or refusal of God's grace and divine Love will be revealed. Jesus will look at me and look at you and at all our departed loved ones and ask of each of us – 'As you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'. Christ is the Lord of eternal life, he is the keeper of the gate – Lord by right, the right due to him because of the CROSS. As Christian believers, we believe and know that he will judge, and we also believe in and know his power to SAVE and to give us the gift of life – it is only ultimately me or you that will judge – our choice!

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