

The Ascension of the Lord (C)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Luke 24:46-53)
08.05.2016

How might we describe the mystery of Christ's Ascension which the Church invites us to celebrate in today's Solemnity? I suggest that we might describe this mystery as a paradoxical blessing

First of all, some words about the notion of blessing since blessing is so central to St Luke's presentation of the Ascension event. We read in Luke's gospel account: *Lifting up His hands, He blessed them. Now, as He blessed them, He withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven.*

The last gesture of Jesus, like that of any loved one, is significant. It lives on in our hearts as a treasured memory. Jesus' hands extended over His disciples in blessing still reposes upon His Church today. Christ's hands uplifted speak to us of something Luke draws to his readers' attention from the beginning to the end of his gospel account: namely, the importance of prayer. (*Hands uplifted and arms extended...* Here we have the great posture of the prayer of blessing in the Bible.)

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' years of ministry open with prayer at His baptism in the Jordan. We are told in Luke's account that *as He came up out of the waters He was at prayer*. It was *As Jesus prayed the heavens opened and a voice was heard* (the Father's voice). *This voice said: 'This is my beloved Son'*. Jesus' earthly sojourn is drawn to a close in like manner. Christ also takes leave of this world in prayer. We are told in Luke's account of the Ascension that Jesus extended His blessing upon His disciples, while in Matthew's account of the same event, Jesus is depicted as having given this assurance to His disciples, even as He took leave of them: *I will be with you always, even to the end of time.*

I suggest that we think this morning of Jesus' leave-taking blessing as reposing upon us today. Christ's blessing, His presence, is with us this morning as it is every day and every moment of our lives. Jesus' prayer is being offered for us right now. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that *Christ lives forever. He is at the Father's right hand in glory. There He intercedes for us*. Without in any way contradicting that statement, more than once in his writings, the apostle Paul makes the point that *Christ also lives in our hearts. He has made His dwelling place in us*, is how the New Testament writer John expresses things.

Jesus' gesture at Bethany (His arms raised in prayer) sends us back to a great Old Testament *type* of Christ: the patriarch Moses. Are we not led to think of that well-known episode recorded for us in chapter 17 of the Book of Exodus? You may recall the story. In Exodus 17 we are told that as Moses watched from the hilltop the battle in which God's people were engaged against the Amalekites, as long as the holy patriarch's arms were raised in prayer, all went well for God's people, the Israelites. The Chosen People were given strength for the combat and the victory was theirs. In the same way as Moses interceded for God's people, we can think of Christ interceding with the Father for the whole Church today. We can think of Christ's arms lifted up in prayer, while He holds all God's people in His heart, sending forth His blessing upon us, as indeed upon all God's children. I wonder if we ever do this. I wonder if we are sufficiently aware of Christ's prayer of blessing in our lives. Do we allow ourselves to be strengthened by the assurance that Jesus intercedes for us?

Some might say, *it is easy to think of ourselves as living under the Lord's blessing when all goes well*. But, is it? If we were honest, I suspect many of us would have to admit that when things are going well in our lives we readily fall into the trap of forgetting God altogether. We

ignore our need for the Lord and His help. That being said, it is surely more challenging to think of the Lord's blessing when disappointments strike, when something comes along that *throws us*, when we are tossed about by cares and worries, when we are cast down, and feel forgotten by the Lord – often these thoughts will arise when we are set aside by other people. Do we not struggle to believe in the Lord's attention and care for us when our plans are upset, when the future seems uncertain, when the way forward appears to be far from evident. We can be tempted to lose heart at those times. When *the waters rage and foam*, to speak like the psalmist, we can react just as the disciples did on the storm-tossed sea. Like them we sometimes cry out: *Lord, do you not care about what is happening to us?*

When the going is tough I wonder if we consider God's love to be unfailing. What way do we react when tests for cancer bring us unwelcome results? What is our form like when the prognosis either for ourselves or for a loved one is not good? How do we feel when a job interview does not turn out as we would have liked? It isn't easy for us at those moments to recall and give thanks for all the Lord's blessings in our lives. And yet it is precisely at such moments, when we find ourselves plunged into the very heart of life's battles and challenges, that we most need to think of and draw strength from the assurance that Christ's arms are lifted up for us in prayer, as He intercedes for us before *God's Throne of Mercy*.

When we feel most alone, when the pressure is on, when life is a real challenge, we would do well to consider how the Lord, faithful to His promise, is ever watching over us, extending His blessing towards us.

There is a paradox in Christ's Ascension blessing, of course. It can be hard for us to get our heads around this at times. The paradox is that it is precisely by withdrawing from this world that Christ renders Himself most intimately close to us. In the mystery of the Ascension we see how the Risen Lord makes Himself present to the Church through His apparent absence. With His Ascension into heaven, Christ-Jesus no longer belongs to this realm; instead He comes to live closer to us than we are to ourselves. If only we grasped this truth!

There can be no denying of the fact that Jesus' Ascension makes for a very real departure of Christ in one sense. With respect to His human nature, He no longer lives on earth. But, that does not mean to say that Christ is no longer with us, His people. Jesus is with us now as the Risen Lord in and through His Spirit poured into our hearts. St Paul speaks of this Spirit as *God's love poured into our hearts*. The Spirit of the Risen Jesus is the gift made to the Church as a result of His Ascension into glory. It is this gift of the Holy Spirit that we will celebrate next Sunday as we commemorate the Pentecost event. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost completes (by which I mean fulfils) our celebration of the Easter mystery. Through Pentecost, Easter is accomplished in the Church.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us at all times and in all places – He is not physically by our sides as once He was when He walked this earth in the company of His disciples. Now we experience His presence in the Church and also, I dare to say, in our own hearts. Living within us, Christ journeys with us through everything we traverse. He walks with us through good times and bad times alike. The grace of Christ's Ascension is that the Risen Lord is now continually present to us, as and when we need Him. The Lord is with us when we need Him most, when life is nothing less than infernal. The Risen Christ who descended into hell goes through hell with us when that is where life leads us. He is present not just by our sides, but within our hearts!

Is this not something truly wonderful to consider?

When the Scriptures tell us that Jesus ascended into heaven, we might ask: just where is

heaven? In line with Christ's teaching about the kingdom of God being within us, St Alphonsus (the founder of the Redemptorists) dares to say *God has made His heaven in human hearts*. Alphonsus of Liguori is not the first to think and speak in this way. Already the ancient wisdom of those early monks whom we call *The Desert Fathers* made this claim, stating: *Heaven begins within you*. (The German Benedictine, Anselm Grun, has made of that statement a book title for his very fine little work on ancient monastic wisdom.) John's gospel – a text we have listened to a lot during the Easter season – records for us Christ's words about making His home in us, while calling upon us to make our home in Him.

A space is needed within our hearts for Christ to be able to come to make His home within us. For me, the mystery of the Ascension sends us in the direction of that empty space at the centre of our being, the hollow area which is there within each one of us. We could say that the void we all feel within our hearts is necessary. A void within our hearts is required for God to be able to reveal Himself in our lives and come to make His home within us.

I believe the former Master-General of the Dominican Order, Fr Timothy Radcliffe, OP, makes a very valid point when he asserts that *the glory of God always shows itself in an empty space*.

Speaking to the Abbots' Congress of the Benedictine Confederation some years ago, Fr Radcliffe reminded the gathered abbots that our monastic life invites us to go to the centre of our being and to hold ourselves there in a de-centred way. Fr Timothy's line of argument is that it is in a void, an emptiness, that the Lord God discloses Himself to us. In his Talk to the Benedictine Abbots' Congress, he spoke of *the ultimate throne of glory being the empty tomb, where there is no body*.

This morning I consider that we are invited to look further still into the mystery of Christ – even beyond the empty tomb. I believe that we are called to see Christ's glory revealed in Jesus' disappearance into the clouds, leaving no trace, no footprints in His trail.

In the path of the Risen Christ there are no footprints. The journey which Christ made when He ascended into heaven was a journey of descent into each one of our hearts. We must look to meet with Him there. He waits for us in those regions of emptiness that we recognise to be part of our lives. This recognition invites each one of us to dare to go to our centre, in a de-centred way, so that we may encounter Christ within our deepest self.

We make the connection with Christ in the inner sanctuary of our being when we respond to His blessing, as the disciples did, by blessing Him in our turn, through the singing of His praises. *The disciples returned to Jerusalem and were continually in the temple blessing God, singing His praises*.

Lifted up into the clouds ... The Lord thrones upon the praises of His people.

To the extent that we live the prayer of praise and thanksgiving, the prayer of blessing, we are graced to meet Christ and experience in our lives what the psalmist promised so long ago: namely, that God's goodness and mercy are with us always.

I leave the penultimate word of this reflection to Christ, thinking of the line He spoke as He ascended into heaven, according to Matthew's gospel version of the story: *Know this. I am with you always, even to the end of time*.

The last word, I leave to Luke's account: *As He took leave of His disciples, Jesus blessed them*.

The blessing of Christ's departure and apparent absence from this world was the first disciples, and still remains for us today, a paradoxical blessing indeed.