

Sermon Feast of the Ascension 2021

The great feast we celebrate today gives expression to one of the clearest assertions that emerges from the New Testament: that the Lord Christ, after his resurrection, was glorified – exalted - and that he resumed a place honour in the eternal dwelling place of God. Our mind on the mystery we celebrate is mostly formed by the narrative proposed to us by the evangelist Luke: a short account he offers at the end of his gospel and a longer account we are more familiar with from the opening of his second volume, the Book of Acts. But even in this longer telling, Luke is incredibly spare on the detail. The account is told us really only with the thinnest of information. Just like when all the evangelists come to describe the mystery of the empty tomb - they really all draw back. They allow a veil of silence to be drawn over the mystery lest too much be said, or the wrong thing be said. So, even the imagery of the story put to us tonight reflects this idea: of Jesus being lifted up, of clouds taking him from sight, of the disciples dazzled as they stare to the sky. This is a *mysterium tremendum*. Ultimately, it is not the details of the story that matter. It is the truth the mystery conveys that matters.

The same truth we find in the narrative accounts from both Acts and the Gospel, is also found perfectly expressed in the Epistle portion from Ephesians. Now, this is a letter prior to the gospels. But this is no primitive, spare, ‘scratching in the dust’ portrait of Christ here! It is a tremendous, exultant, bold assertion of the exalted status of the risen Lord. We can properly see the portion as a prayer. Indeed it opens: *I pray that...* And a prayer in which incredibly rich descriptions are piled one on top of another. A text abundant in superlatives, giving us a hint of the confidence the author has in Christ’s exalted status. And it is a status which plays out on a truly cosmic scale.

Now, this prayer the apostle offers on behalf of the Ephesian Christians is that they may receive wisdom, that they come to know God, that they may be enlightened and know the hope to which they have been called, that they will realize the riches of Christ’s glory. And importantly he prays that the faithful of this infant church will realize *the greatness of his power for those who believe*. The source of this great power is of course God. And a power *we too* possess. We hold the same faith, the same hope as these early Christians. And the same God who has already shown us the immense power he is capable of, the power he has *already* unleashed upon the world, by raising Jesus from the dead. Remember, this is the God Christians profess: the God who raises the dead. This is the God who is on our side!

The supreme manifestation of God's power occurs in Christ's resurrection. The mystery of the ascension then really continues the mystery of the resurrection. It is two parts of the one saving act of God. And to make the distinction the New Testament writers turn to the imagery of the psalms which speaks of the enthronement of God in his temple. Paul picks this up and tells us: *God ...raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.* And from this place Christ rule extends to all and over all, and is given all honour. His name is *above every name*. In the mind of the infant church the resurrected Christ is the exalted and glorified Christ.

And this is the same *hope to which we have been called*. The hope which can be realized in us by same power working in us which raised Jesus. As the collect for this feast reminds us, and as the Eucharistic preface sets out for us, *that where he is, thither might we also ascend, and reign with him in glory*. This feast today assures us that what now is Christ's in glory will be ours in hope.

Saint John Chrysostom in Constantinople in the fourth century reminds us, 'through the mystery of the ascension we, who seemed unworthy of God's earth, are taken up into heaven... our very nature, against which the Cherubim guarded the gates of paradise, is enthroned today high above the cherubim.' Christian hope is such that against all the troubles, difficulties and darkness of this life we too can rise above. They are not what has ultimate power over us. What has ultimate power is that which raised the Lord Jesus from the dead and which will lead us to our glorious inheritance. Amen.