

Sermon Feast of the Ascension 2022

In this place, on a night like this, at this very hour, we gathered here *forty days ago* to celebrate Our Lord's triumph over death and the grave in his glorious, life-giving resurrection. It is of course not accidental, nor incidental, that the gospel writer Luke, when he sets down to write his sequel the Book of Acts, notes, *After his passion he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them for forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* Forty, of course, has rich and deep meaning in the biblical record, and Luke is surely tapping into some of this as he seeks to give expression to this mysterious moment in Our Lord's risen life.

Now, mentioned something around 150 times in the bible (depending on your translation), the number 40 generally symbolizes a period of testing, trial or probation, or radical change. But then, oftentimes finally, triumph as well. The first reference comes from the story of Noah, where it rained 40 days and forty nights, destroying all living things on earth. But also, 40 days after the rain stopped Noah opened the window of the ark to begin the process of rebuilding. Moses lived 40 years in Egypt and then 40 years in the desert before God selected him to lead his people out of slavery. Twice on Mount Sinai Moses spent 40 days and nights receiving God's laws. For 40 days, spies were sent to investigate the land God promised the Israelites as an inheritance. For 40 days the prophet Jonah warned the ancient city of Nineveh that its destruction would come because of its many sins. The prophet Ezekiel laid on his right side for 40 days to symbolize Judah's sins. Having destroyed the altars of Baal and then pursued by his enemies, the mighty prophet Elijah went 40 days without food or water at Mount Horeb.

The number 40 can also represent a generation of man. In the archetypal story of testing and trial, for 40 years the children of Israel were punished for their faithlessness by wandering in the wilderness. Once possessing the land of promise, we are told the Judges of Israel served God for 40 years. And when the system of Judges gave way to the monarchy, the three great and well-known Hebrew kings, Saul, David and Solomon, each ruled for 40 years.

Our Lord's public ministry was 'bookended', if you like, by a period of 40 days. Yes, 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension. But also, remember, 40 days tempted by the devil in the wilderness.

Now, we are not meant to see this in a mechanical, technical, automatic sense. Nor are we meant to sit back in wonder and say, *geez, isn't that a remarkable coincidence that 40 keeps on popping up*. And nor are we to say, *geez, this God of ours really has a hang-up about 40!* as if there was something magical about it all. The biblical world was governed by a far more poetic mind than ours. And our world, governed as it is by clocks and computers, risks missing the point of it all.

The point being, that 40 in the biblical mind simply describes a period of time, or a generation. But importantly, they are moments of change and transition. Periods of testing and purifying, moments of insight and growth. Periods that we are meant to take notice of. *Something* was occurring within these moments of time. The point is stressed - emphasized - in Luke's record of Our Lord's life by the very presence of these 'periods' – these moments – being at the start and at the end of his public ministry, the most noteworthy thing of all!

In the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, we are told tonight that Jesus appeared to his disciples with 'convincing proofs' and 'instructing them on the kingdom of God'. The message of the kingdom was of course the content of Jesus' proclamation before his death. But the message of the kingdom is now filled out by the message *of Jesus*. Jesus becomes the content of the message. He embodies the life of the kingdom. In this time after the ascension, the church now carries and proclaims the message of the kingdom. And in *its* own life, the church embodies this message.

So, the Ascension we celebrate today, then, marks an ending. A certain period – 40 days – comes to an end. A period of a certain kind of presence, a time when Jesus showed himself to the disciples, when he was seen by them, when he talked with them and gave them instruction, finishes. And this is confirmed by the very imagery of being 'lifted up' and being 'carried out of sight'. But this ending suggests that a new period was beginning. A beginning that could only commence by an ending. An ending that marks the beginning of a new era, the era of the church.

Our Lord ascends to the heights inaugurating not just another period. Not just another moment. Not just another generation, but a new era. And in this new era, the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, continues to make Christ known. Through *our* life, *our* witness, *our* proclamation, we make known the living Christ, until the end of time Amen.