

A Homily for Ascension 2020

The Rev'd Dr Max Wood

All of the Bible readings that we just heard today, unsurprisingly either expressly or implicitly refer to the event that we are celebrating today, Jesus's glorious Ascension into heaven.

The Ascension is part of our Easter season. Indeed, it is the penultimate event and celebration in our Easter narrative, which began in the empty tomb, with the Resurrection of Jesus.

So the Ascension of Jesus is related to the Resurrection of Jesus. However, it cannot be conflated with the Resurrection of Jesus.

The Ascension, is a distinct article of faith. As we say, in each Eucharist, in the Nicene Creed,

"On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;"

that's the Resurrection affirmation, and what comes next is the Ascension affirmation:

"he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Resurrection and Ascension are indeed related, but they are also distinct. Distinct articles of faith.

The opening verses of our Acts reading today, tells us that after his resurrection, for 40 days, Jesus made numerous post-Resurrection appearances to his disciples. But this couldn't continue.

And indeed, we are told, that among some of his closest followers, the post-Resurrection appearances were creating some doubt and confusion.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew expressly says that while the eleven disciples worshiped the resurrected Christ... *"some doubted"* (v.17).

And the question of the disciples in our Acts reading:

"Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v.6)

while disputed, sounds to me and some commentators, as a very confused, backward step in the disciples appreciation of the nature of Jesus and his kingdom.

They seem to have gone back to thinking about Jesus, as creating a political, an earthly kingdom, kicking out the Romans, stuff. The type of misunderstanding which may have disappointed Judas, leading him ultimately to a level of anger that motivated him to betray Jesus.

But with the Ascension, any post-Resurrection doubt or confusion ends. In the Ascension, Jesus is lifted up, and a cloud takes him out of their sight. In the Ascension, Jesus is exalted. Jesus is glorified. Jesus is taken to the

heavenly realm to sit at the right hand of the Father. And for the disciples, doubt and confusion – disappear!

The final verses of Luke's account of the Ascension tell us, that Jesus:

"...was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51).

And the disciples worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." (Luke 24:52).

Any doubt or confusion is resolved, and they are now, back on track.

The Ascension account in Acts, also firstly anticipates our final Easter celebration next Sunday, when Jesus tells his disciples:

"...for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now." (Acts 1:5)

The promised Advocate is coming, and coming soon, you, my disciples, will not be left alone. The coming of the Holy Spirit is anticipated.

And further, the Spirit-filled, new and distinctive focus of the disciples' and emerging Church's mission is anticipated as well. Jesus tells his disciples in our Acts reading today:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and... to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

The disciples, and the emerging Church, are to:

"go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

The world, every nation on earth. Not just Israel, or even just Samaria, people of every nation are now able to be part of God's family.

And so with the post-resurrection appearance period concluded, the Ascension of Jesus dispels any confusion or doubt amongst his closest remaining followers, by glorifying and exulting him – seating him at the right hand of the Father.

So that the disciples, not long to be alone, will be able to begin their sacred mission of proclaiming their Risen and Ascended Lord, to the ends of the earth.

The Lord be with you.