

## **Ascension Homily**

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Always a tricky subject the Ascension, Jesus returning to the Father is difficult to understand, he has only just risen from the dead and now is preparing to leave. It seems perhaps that Resurrection is not the whole story

We can and do struggle with ideas about where either heaven or Jesus might be, and His own words to the disciples in the Gospels do not make it a great deal clearer, not least because Luke does not always tell s all of them.

Jesus has been telling the disciples (most notably in John's gospel) that he will return to the Father, and he will send the Holy Spirit to them, to set them up, or to equip them for ministry and mission.

Lack of clarity though, does start to make us think to focus more on who Jesus is rather than exactly where. Jesus' ascension clearly shows him to be the Lord and the Messiah, exalted at God's right hand in ways not merely physical, but what it actually means has still to be revealed to the disciples.

Luke in both his Gospel and in Acts describes Jesus as being carried up into heaven, hidden from their sight, possibly by the clouds, just as in many other places in Scripture cloud represents the glory of God but hidden in a way almost to protect the onlookers from the impact of God's glory, for example the clouds on Mt Sinai, or during the Exodus as a pillar of cloud, or during Isaiah's vision in the Temple, and again at both Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration God spoke from the cloud, and here in our reading from Acts today Luke tells us a cloud took or hid him from their sight

The Ascension marks the end of Jesus' earthly Resurrection appearances, and it is in that sense the last bit of the Resurrection- Jesus is risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven The resurrection is victory over death. The ascension goes that bit further and lifts humanity up to heaven with Jesus. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine so His ascension takes our human flesh, to the right hand of God the Father. Even so the disciples must have felt very apprehensive at the prospect of Jesus leaving them.

They still know very little about the spirit. Yet they, and by extension we too, will not be left alone and comfortless.

The Holy spirit is variously described in the gospels as:

the Comforter as the one who will console support them when Jesus has returned to the Father, or support us when we are wary and faith is difficult

as the Counsellor the spirit a source of wisdom and understanding to enrich their thinking and to remain with them and with us as we in our own time bear witness to the good news,

and then as the Advocate who will represent them or defend them, and who will advocate or speak for us all,

and finally the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, this is my favourite description of the Spirit who will remind them, and all of us of Jesus's teachings and sayings.

All this support so that there can be effective witnesses to fulfil the mission to testify about Jesus to the ends of the earth.

In Luke's gospel Jesus reminds the disciples 'it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.' And so as we are also some of those who believe in the Resurrection are we witnesses too, and all this is what the Holy Spirit will enable them, and us to do.

As Jesus is taken from them Luke tells us – 'He lifted up his hands and blessed them.' Just think of Jesus's hands of blessing. They are scarred from the nails on the cross, from his earlier life as well. The hands that bless us all are hands that still bear wounds of love, His Resurrection body still bears the scars of his earthly life. And Jesus's blessing does not end, for as Jesus is taken from them, Luke tells us that He continues to bless all who follow by leaving with the promise of baptism by the Holy Spirit very soon.

This means that the resurrection and the new life of the resurrection, is set free into the lives of the disciples both those original disciples and all those of us who will hear the good news in the years ahead and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit comes.

Jesus's continuing presence through the work of the Spirit moves him from being purely local as a man in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, to becoming universal, His presence through the Spirit is now in all times and all

places, accessible to all those who call upon him.

Jesus leaves the disciples waiting for the Spirit, telling them in John's Gospel that it is to their advantage that he returns to the Father in order that the Spirit will come and bring them all the gifts they will need for ministry and mission. His presence with us now, is the gift of the same Spirit to all who follow Jesus.

While they wait, the disciples were caught up in worshipping God, they were continually in the Temple blessing God. They were receiving God's blessing – so that they, might bless God and then might bless others. It's like a virtuous circle God blesses disciples who bless others and also praise and bless, God who blesses them.....

Our reading from Acts tells us that Jesus will come again, so in the meantime the first disciples show us the way of waiting on God until that time, a way that is rooted in hope, experienced with joy, but most of all lived out in worship and blessing. So as we wait for Pentecost let us pray;

The response after each phrase is **Come Holy Spirit**

As we wait in silence, in song, in work and in prayer  
**Come Holy Spirit.**

as we celebrate Christ's rising in glory

**Come Holy Spirit.**

As we worship God in glorious majesty

**Come Holy Spirit.**

As we listen to your words of compassion and mercy,

**Come Holy Spirit.**

As we wait eagerly for your refreshing and renewing power

**Come Holy Spirit.**

As we long to be set on fire with your love at Pentecost

**Come Holy Spirit. Amen**