

The Year of the Word: Reflection II

So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into Heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Mark 16: 19



We are nearing the end of Eastertide, soon we will once again enter into Ordinary Time in the Church's Liturgical Calendar. But before this we will celebrate two of the great solemnities in the Christian Liturgical Calendar, Ascension Day and Pentecost or Whitsunday. These two feasts bring God's plan to completion - The Son is restored and returned to the His Father; His work on Earth complete for the time being until He returns again at the end of time; God's Spirit is given to Mankind so that God's work can continue and Mankind knows God has not abandoned them.

The first, Ascension Day commemorates the bodily ascension of Jesus into Heaven. Ascension Day is traditionally celebrated on a Thursday, and on the 40th day after Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year Ascension Day is celebrated on Thursday 21st May.

Before His ascension, Christ spent 40 days teaching the apostles and disciples about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1.3). The Lord encouraged them by saying that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8). The Ascension occurred at Bethany on the Mount of Olives mentioned in Luke 19.29. Jesus had travelled through Bethany on his way to Jerusalem. It was where He asked His disciples to find a colt for Him to ride, and, from then on, the crowds greeted Jesus by waving palms and rejoicing at His entry into Jerusalem (the Palm Sunday Gospel reading). Christ's work of redemption is called the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It is fulfilled in His passion, death, resurrection, and glorious ascension into Heaven. This Paschal Mystery constitutes one action for the salvation of the world since Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." (Romans 4.25). Jesus' ascension also signified the completion of His time on earth, celebrated 10 days before the Feast of Pentecost - the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christ was already preparing His disciples for His departure by promising them real hope when He said:

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14. 3).

According to Luke, when Jesus was lifted up, a cloud took Him out of their sight (Acts 1.9).

In this text, we see two key visible things:

- "He was lifted up" (elevation and praise)
- "a cloud took Him" (entrance into the divine mystery).

Jesus is physically lifted up from Earth to Heaven, it is a sign of another journey that Christ needs to make in order to arrive in Heaven in His glorified state in God. The meaning of the ascension is, therefore, that of a revelation that the risen one has been transported into heavenly intimacy of God. This is shown by "the cloud," a well-known Old Testament biblical sign of the divine presence. So Christ disappears from the eyes of His disciples by entering the transcendent realm of the invisible God.

This is intrinsic to the mystery of Christ's purpose in ascending when He says of Himself:

"I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father." (John 16.28).

This return to the Father visibly realises a messianic truth foretold in the Old Testament. Since when Mark tells us, "the Lord Jesus... was taken up into Heaven" (Mark 16.19), his words echo the "prophecy of the Lord" recorded in Psalm 110: 1

"The Lord says to my lord,

'Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"

To sit at the right hand of God means to share in His kingly power and divine dignity. The ascension of Christ marks the beginning of a new era for humanity. The Messiah has come and He has lived among us. He has offered the perfect sacrifice for reconciliation with the Father through His death, and has risen triumphant from the grave. Now He has departed in His earthly body so that the Holy Spirit may come. Therefore, we can say with absolute confidence the Apostles' Creed that summarises these events and their truths perfectly.

The second feast, Pentecost is the festival when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word pentekoste means "fiftieth" and was borrowed from Greek-speaking Jews who used the phrase to refer to the Jewish 'Festival of Weeks'. Pentecost therefore, occurs 50 days after Easter Sunday (and 10 days after Ascension). Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the Christian Church, and the start of the Church's mission to the world since according to the Book of Acts, the apostles suddenly found themselves speaking in other languages, enabled by the Holy Spirit. This year Pentecost day is celebrated on Sunday 31st May.

Pentecost was an event, but the actual experience was transcendental, making an abstract depiction of Pentecost very compelling to an artist. Traditionally, Pentecost is portrayed as a dove and/or with tongues of fire above the disciples' heads. Jesus could have eaten his last supper on his own and the Spirit could have descended upon the disciples when they were alone. While there are times when the Holy Spirit touches us as individuals, the fact that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were given to a gathering of believers is not incidental. It underpins the centrality of the Church in God's work in the world. The Church's mission is not an addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its visible expression: in its whole being and in all its members, the Church is sent to proclaim, bear witness, make present, and spread the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Pentecost is the new covenant between Christians and Jesus that fulfils the old Mosaic Covenant at Mount Sinai. It reveals a similar theophany (appearance by God) in the form of wind and fire, and is the New Testament resolution of the Tower of Babel Story in Genesis, where the pre-Israelites were separated by language and confusion into different nations. So Pentecost turns the Babel story around, and unites everyone on a mission from God that would have no linguistic barriers, a mission that would stretch to all four corners of the earth. In the exciting reading from Acts we have nothing short of a Hollywood movie but clearly on a very tight budget. What we have is a violent wind, tongues of fire, a smoky mist, a moon of blood and many different languages spoken and understood. Nobody is imagining it, nobody's drunk or drugged, it's 9 o'clock in the morning - everything is normal. Well relatively speaking...

Jesus needed to send the Holy Spirit because His own disciples could not understand His teachings or read the signs He had predicted while He was still with them. So how on earth would they cope when He was gone? This dove from above that dove-bombed into their lives at Pentecost has remained with all believers ever since. Not as tongues of fire or anything visible, but then dove-tailing is a delicate business. To dove-tail into our inner lives, we need to accept the Spirit into the depths of our hearts rather than just above our heads.

"In the last days I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. I will work wonders in the Heavens above and signs on the Earth below".

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.



Readings for Reflection from the Gospels

John 20: 17 Jesus talks to Mary Magdalene of His Ascension
 Mark 16: 19, Luke 24: 50-53 and the Acts of the Apostles
 1: 8-11 - The Ascension
 Acts 2: 1-13 - Pentecost
 Genesis 11: 1-9 - The Story of Babel
 Isaiah 11: 1-2 - Foretelling of the Gifts
 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 - The Gifts of the Spirit
 Galatians 5: 22-25 - The Fruits of the Spirit



Jesus ascends into Heaven.

God goes up with shouts of joy;
 the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.
 Alleluia, praise His name.
 Forever and ever,

He was lifted up while they looked on.
 He made Him sit at His right hand in Heaven.
 Alleluia, praise His name.
 Forever and ever,
 Amen.



The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died and was buried;
 he descended into hell;
 on the third day, he rose again from the dead;
 he ascended into heaven,
 and is seated at the right hand
 of God the Father almighty;
 from there he will come to judge
 the living and the dead.

I BELIEVE in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and life everlasting. Amen.



Pentecost Sunday - Whitsun