

Ascension: The Arrival of One of Us

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Most churches—especially Protestant ones—have been rather sketchy in their celebration of Ascension. Perhaps it is because the day always falls on Thursday, not a helpful time for Protestants who have difficulty with any day for worship other than Sunday. But even the Sunday after Ascension rarely gains more than a passing mention of the event. Perhaps it is because the celebration comes sandwiched between Easter and Pentecost. Those are more familiar to us, and the need for another liturgical occasion is not great in this time of the year. More likely, the explanation lies in our real lack of clarity regarding what we would celebrate if we did stress the occasion.

Narrative events of a past history in themselves do not create celebrations. What is needed is the significance of the event for those who are gathered to celebrate. We can wax eloquent about the meaning of the Incarnation. We can remember with great joy the importance of the resurrection for us. Even Pentecost can be understood. But the Ascension?

The lectionary passages are not terribly helpful. Only one set is listed, to be used every year. The major content is the account of the Ascension. The significance is largely seen as the rule and authority of God, most especially of God incarnate. This authority of the risen Christ is clearly part of the credal affirmation: “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” The Nicene Creed adds that this coming to judge will be “in glory.”

In terms of traditional theology, the first significance of the Ascension, captured by these references, can be best seen in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. In the famous hymn in chapter 2, we read these words: “Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. therefore God has highly exalted him. . . .” The Ascension is seen as the end of the period of humiliation. Christ has returned to the glory that is properly his, after a period of time in which that glory was set aside for the humiliation involved in his life among us, culminating in the cross.

Obviously, this emphasis on exaltation is a major and early theme regarding the Ascension. It has not been the only one, however. As a narrative, the account concluded the earthly ministry and appearances of Jesus. This is a second major interpretation. After the Ascension, no appearances of the Risen Christ are to be expected. The Holy Spirit will now be the expected link with Christ. This seems to be of major importance to the Luke-Acts account. This emphasis, however, adds to the significance of Pentecost, rather than clarifying what is to be celebrated ten days before.

There is a third view of the Ascension that has held major sway, historically, especially in the Reformed tradition. Its recovery could make far easier the celebration of the festival, since it has clear association with the life of

Christians today. It is preachable and needed. For the clearest statement of this third emphasis we must turn to a passage that is not included in the common lectionary for any occasion. The passage is Hebrews 2:5-9. Let us look at the whole text (we will leave the gender-specific language of the RSV in the quotation, though we will deal with it quite differently in the commentary):

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.

This is a very tightly reasoned, dense passage that needs to be looked at very closely. Two Old Testament texts stand behind it. The first, obviously, is the eighth Psalm, quoted here from the Septuagint version. But behind that psalm lies the passage from Genesis 1:26ff where, in the account of creation, human beings are created with the intention of their having dominion over all the rest of creation.

This passage in Hebrews, then, is referring back to both of these ancient passages, for the purpose of showing that the world to come is subject to human beings, not to angels. In fact, human beings are created to be far superior to the angels. From the psalm and from Genesis, the intention of God can be seen. The human creation is the highest in all of creation. Yet this passage from Hebrews says that human beings do not have that dominion. When we look around us, it is quite clear that "As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him." The "him" here, in the context, must refer to the human creature to whom such dominion belongs, the human creature defined in Genesis 1:27 as male and female. There is a note of realism that is not present in either Genesis or Psalm 8, since both were considering God's intent in creation, whereas Hebrews is specifically dealing with the meaning of redemption.

Our situation, then, is that we have been created for a great purpose and goal. We are to have dominion over all of creation. However, our present reality is that we do not have such dominion. Then the author of Hebrews makes this great statement. Though we see that we do not have such dominion, "we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor." He has obtained that final, human goal of dominion over all of creation. When we see Jesus—the ascended Christ in all of his glory—we are seeing a human being who has finally obtained the goal for which we all were created. He is what we are to become, what we were always intended to become. His ascension tells us a great deal about God. It tells us about the Redeemer. But it also tells us much about ourselves. It shows us what we are to become and that our victory, our finally obtaining true dominion over all the rest of creation, will indeed occur, in spite of the present situation that makes such a goal seem absolutely impossible.

There is much more that needs to be said about the character of this intended dominion, and how it differs from the present situation. But before that, let us look more at the implications of this view of the Ascension. It is eschatological, pointing to the character of the final kingdom. It speaks of the final goal of creation which really had never been completely fulfilled before Jesus. He is the first one who really is what we are intended to be. It speaks of a redemption that is not "souls" alone, but a whole creation, what Revelation 21:1 calls "a new heaven and a new earth." The ascension of Jesus is the beginning of that fulfillment, since a human being has finally achieved the goal. Clearly this does not deny that Jesus is also fully God. But it is a stress on the incarnation, a stress on his humanity, and the significance of the ascension to glory of this human one.

Seen in this way, we can also understand that the Hebrews passage is not the only one that gives us such a perspective. Romans 8 points to the ultimate dominion over all powers of those who are the children of God, the fellow heirs with Christ, who have already received the first fruits of the Spirit because of the work of Jesus. Acts 7:54-60 speaks of the death of Stephen, who, with a vision of the Ascended Christ, was able to be the conqueror even now of all things. He imitated in his death the strange victory of one who has conquered even death and hatred. Like Jesus, he prays that his enemies may be forgiven, and he commends his spirit to Jesus who is now "at the right hand of God."

What would all of this mean for a contemporary interpretation of the Ascension? It is easy to say that part of the human problem at the moment is the attempt—especially by technology—to have entirely too much dominion over creation. We try to dominate, and therefore exploit the rest of creation, rather than seeing ourselves as part of that creation. But this is not the kind of dominion that Scripture views as positive. Clearly the passages mentioned from Genesis, Psalm 8, and Hebrews see human beings as very much a part of creation, and not separate from it. At the same time, the dominion that is anticipated indicates that precisely our need for the rest of creation, our dependence upon the earth for food and water are the reason why God gave the assurance to humanity that the earth would supply what is needed. For this reason the second creation story in Genesis 3 understands that the Fall leads to an interruption in the ready supply of food. Food will now require great labor and is not the dependable source originally anticipated. The Old Testament has many references to the present antipathy between humanity and animals, along with the visions of the "Peaceable Kingdom" in which a nature "red in tooth and claw" will not be the norm, and animals will be companions rather than threats. Our threat to them, and their threat to us will be gone. True dominion does not involve the kind of exploitation we now encounter. True dominion gives humanity a responsibility for creation and an awareness of mutual dependence.

Beyond the issue of false dominion, Christians are aware of our lack of dominion over war and racism, over oppression and injustice, over sickness and death. These are all parts of our reality that are not intended in God's good creation. We can say quite genuinely that we do not see all things under our dominion. The great affirmation of the Ascension is, however, that in spite of

our lack of dominion, we see Jesus, who is with God in glory and power. He has conquered. He does have dominion. And he is the guarantee that ultimately, we will also have the dominion for which we were created.

Without such faith, we could often be so discouraged at our present helplessness that we might decide the struggle is not worth it. We might readily withdraw, and hope for a better world later, but give up for the time being. A clear faith in the Ascended One can give us hope and endurance, strength that can enable us to go on in otherwise hopeless situations. Since we are ultimately to have dominion, we had best live now as though that were true. That is what Stephen does.

Wherever the contrast between what is and what God intends is stark and glaring, there the meaning of the Ascension can bring new hope. We are not only to rise to new life: that is the message of Easter. We are finally to have the dominion over all creation—the responsibility well carried out for a creation that is harmonious and interdependent. To the degree that members of a congregation feel that they generally have things under control in their lives and in the world around them, this understanding of the message of Ascension will probably have little significance. To the degree, however, that they feel the burden of things that are wrong and which are at present beyond their control, the message that Jesus, who is one of us, has achieved the dominion we ultimately shall have, is good news indeed.