

Night Prayer

Ascension Day and 7th Sunday of Easter
13th and 16th May 2021

A cloud took him

Introduction

Thursday was Ascension Day. Because it will always occur mid-week on a Thursday (forty days after Easter) it is a festival that often gets forgotten. Perhaps it is not helped by the story seeming (to our eyes at any rate) a little OTT. The visual interpretations from artists showing feet disappearing into clouds do not make it any easier. Hopefully we can redress this somewhat this evening.



The Ascension. Hans von Kulmbach
1513. Part of an altarpiece for a
church in Nuremberg.

Opening Prayer

Why are we looking up to heaven?
Christ has come;
Christ has risen;
Christ will come again.

You have heard what was written about Jesus in Scripture—
how he would suffer and die
and then rise from the dead on the third day;
how the same power that raised Jesus from the dead
raised Him to heaven and seated Him at the right hand of God,
where he now lives to intercede on our behalf.

So let us come before God with confidence,
through the loving intercession of our risen Lord,
Jesus Christ!

Opening Music

We begin with the anthem 'Coelos ascendit hodie' – '(Jesus Christ) has ascended today into the heavens', by Charles Stanford (c 1892). This is sung by a virtual choir. Words in Latin and English are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4GydpvDpZk>

Confession

Almighty God,
we confess that we have our eyes set in the clouds
instead of on the earth You have given us.

We desire heavenly treasure
but we keep believing that worldly means will help us attain it.

Forgive us for our short sightedness.
Draw us away from the temptations
to seek worldly power and measures of success,
and call us to the down-to-earth message of Your love,
to care for the needs of those around us,
especially the oppressed and marginalized.

You have called us through scripture
to care for the widows and orphans among us;
help us to see all those who are left out by society and are in need.
Help us to break down the dividing walls that we have placed,
so that we may truly be one,
as You and Christ are one.
For it is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Words of assurance

Go, know that you are forgiven and loved
by the God who made the earth, and made you,
and share the Good News. Amen.

(written by Rev. Mindi and posted on Rev-o-lution.)

Readings

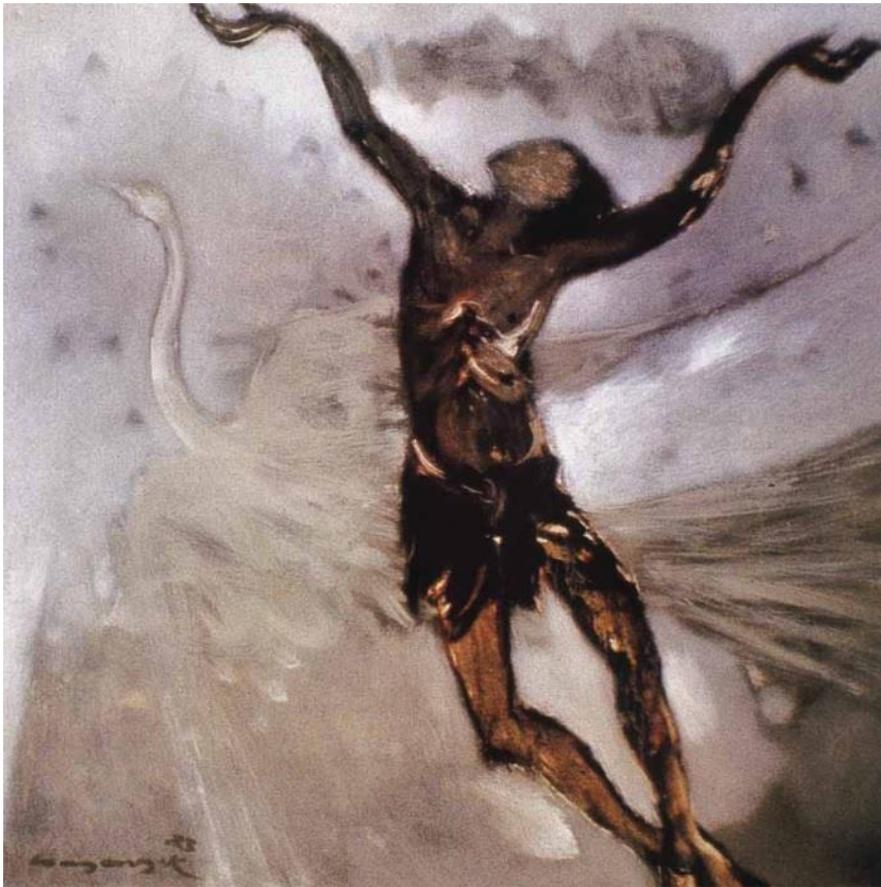
If the author of Luke and Acts are the same person, he or she has two bites on this cake!

Luke 24:50-53

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Acts 1:9-11

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."



Ascension' by Indonesian artist
Bagong Kussudiardja, (1983)

Reflection (adapted from ideas on Sacredise.com)

Whatever the disciples actually witnessed that day, the facts of the experience are far less important than the meaning. The Ascension certainly does not mean that heaven is 'up there', and God is looking down on us from some far-removed place.

Rather, the Ascension offers us a number of crucial truths that, in this world of injustice and inequality, we desperately need to reclaim. First the fact that Jesus did not die, but was seen to 'return' to the Godhead physically is a continuation of the story of incarnation. God does not despise the human body – rather God embraces it, inhabits it, and glorifies it, making human flesh part of the Godhead! This means that the needs of the body – for food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, and loving, intimate touch – are all part of the Gospel and are included in God's gift of salvation.

Secondly, the Ascension declares as clearly and loudly as it can that Jesus, and not Caesar (nor any other Empire, government, system, or social hierarchy) is Lord over all. This means that our lives are called to be a reflection of Christ's reign in the midst of the other forces and 'lords' that influence and control our world.

Finally, the Ascension always comes with the promise of the Holy Spirit's power which tells us that God is not absent and removed from us, but continues to be completely immersed in the world and in the lives of human beings.

It may be tempting to make this celebration about Christian triumphalism, but that would be to deny the meaning of Christ's earthly life. Rather, the Ascension is the necessary next step in that life, ensuring that God remains involved with human beings, that God's presence continues to be available to us, and that we know that everything that makes us human – including our physicality – has been embraced and welcomed into God. It's less about 'Christianity' defeating all, and more about Christ drawing all things into the life of God.



'The Ascension by Jyoti Sahi, an Indian artist from Bangalore. 'In this image Jesus ascends as the yogi, who is seated in deep meditation and self-realization.'

Prayer

We love to think of you as a victorious conqueror, Jesus;
the one who claims power by force of strength,
and makes all others bow at his feet.

We love to feel that we're in your corner, Jesus;
on the winning side – powerful by association
and safe from what threatens us
because of your strong presence.

But, then you speak about gathering all things together,
of unity and reconciliation,
of love and sharing,
of filling all things with yourself.
You invite us into a conversation, not a conquest,
into dialogue, not dominion,
into the power of love,
not the love of power.

We praise you, Ascended One, for refusing to hoard your power and glory,
for refusing to remain aloof and removed from creation,
and for including the likes of us
in your cosmic community.

Amen.

Hymn

'The head that once was crowned with thorns.' Sung by the choir of Norwich Cathedral.
Words are on the screen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw2U_sf02II

Affirmation

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,
a new world has broken into ours—
a world in which justice does come for the poor,
freedom comes for the prisoners,
and healing for the sick.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,
a new community has been formed—
a community that loves and cares for all members,
a family that welcomes all who are abandoned and rejected,
a place where all find a place of belonging.



Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,
a new creation has begun—
all that was distorted is being restored,
all that is corrupted is being renewed,
all that was broken is being made whole.

Because Jesus ascended and sits at the right hand of God,
God's new world has begun.

(written by Christine Sine, and posted on Godspace.)

Intercessions

When we celebrate the Ascension, we affirm our belief that God is committed to humanity, to equality, to justice and to compassionate inclusion of all. God's new world might have begun, as we said in the affirmation above, but it needs us through our actions to make it happen.

Let us spend time before God bringing before Him our concerns for others and reflect how we may be practical instruments of His love.

Post-Ascension Prayer

Where did you go Jesus?
Where did you go?
We stand, necks craning back, looking heavenwards
But we cannot see you
Where did you go?
Did you leave us?

Hush my child,
Listen, listen,
Listen for the breeze
Listen for the breath
Listen for the Holy Wind's whispered promise

You are not alone
You are not alone
You are never alone

My love is yours
My strength is yours
My wisdom... all yours for the taking
Listen, listen, listen....

It comes, a gentle breeze, caressing your spirit
It comes, building, energising, filling the spaces
Until you are full

O Holy Spirit!
Come!

(written by Julie, and posted on RevGalBlogPals.)

Closing commission and blessing

People of God,
let's not just stand here, gazing into heaven
as the disciples did after they saw Jesus leave.
Instead, let's take up the mission Jesus left us:
to be his witnesses,
to tell everyone we meet who Jesus is,
and how he has changed us.

And may the grace of God,
the love of Jesus Christ,
and the presence of the Holy Spirit
go with us all.
Amen.

Closing Music

This is a modern piece simply called 'The Ascension'. Words are on the screen. See how you react to it!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23u5t5_WPc



“And I will be with you always
To the end of all things!”
He lifts His hands and blesses them
And is taken as with wings.

*Part of a totem pole carved after ancient
Tsimshian culture by David K. Fison (Nadáam
Nłomsk) of the Tsimshian Killer Whale Clan,
Anchorage, Alaska, 2001. Erected at St John's
United Methodist Church, Anchorage.*