

Homily for the Choral Eucharist on Ascension Thursday, 13 May 2010
Christ Church, South Yarra (Anglican Church of Australia, Diocese of Melbourne)
Acts 1:1–11 (with 1:12–14 postcommunion) Eph 1:15–23, Ps 110, Luke 24:44–53 (all NRSV)
Catherine Playoust

What picture is in your mind when you imagine the ascension of Jesus Christ? It might be a group of disciples clustered around the central figure of Jesus, blessing the disciples as he starts to rise from the ground. Or what you imagine might be a few seconds later, so that the only parts of Jesus that are visible are his feet, peeking out from the cloud that has already obscured the rest of his body. Or you might see the disciples flanked by angels, who ask them why they are still gazing upward into the sky after their Lord has disappeared from sight.

These familiar pictures are taken from the end of the Gospel of Luke and the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, both of which we've heard proclaimed this evening. They foreground the departure of Jesus, as he is lifted up and taken away. Along with the first disciples, we can find ourselves looking up at the cloud in puzzlement, wondering what to do next. If we probe these passages a little more, we can discover that God does have a plan for what is to happen – the disciples should wait to receive power from on high, the gift of the Holy Spirit promised by the Father. After Pentecost, they will have the inspiration and the courage to go forth to the ends of the earth, witnessing to the good news.

Tonight I want you to suppose that you are one of the disciples gathered there at the scene. Maybe you're more quick-witted than the others, or you simply can't bear to let Jesus go, but you grab onto his hand as he starts to ascend and you go up with him. What you see as you ascend is influenced by what you expect to see. You're a first-century Jew, and so for you, the skies and the heavens are one and the same. You go past birds and clouds, but you keep going, past planets and stars. It isn't the cold, empty space of modern astronomy but a sparkling world of concentric spheres, each more extraordinary than the one before, and the stars are angelic beings. It's a dangerous world up there – not all the spiritual beings are friendly in the lower heavens – but Jesus protects you and you travel together past the benevolent angels to the ultimate heaven. This is the place where God dwells. It is God the Father who has raised his Son from the dead and up into the heavens, and now he seats his Son at his right hand, in acknowledgement of the saving work that he has achieved. To quote the Ephesians reading we heard, God has set Jesus "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the

age to come. And he has put all things under his feet” (Eph 1:21–23). The Son reigns over all spiritual beings, good or evil, and above every name except the unuttered name of God himself.

For the letter to the Ephesians, as in our Christian tradition more broadly, the ascent and enthronement of Jesus is part of the plan of God that has been unfolding since the beginning of creation. The opening prayer in Ephesians is a blessing of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for all the spiritual blessings God has bestowed upon us. He chose us to be holy, destined us to be his adoptive children, and sent his Son to redeem us through his blood. Jesus’ life and death were an act of saving love, in keeping with the Father’s plan, so that we might come to receive our inheritance that God has had in store for us from the start. It is the Father’s plan, but he carries it out through his Son, and in the fullness of time, all things are to be summed up in Christ.

If you’re still up there in the highest heaven, witnessing the enthronement of Jesus, you may be feeling rather out of place. And yet you aren’t as misplaced as you might think, according to the way that Ephesians presents the situation. The passage we heard tonight finishes by saying that the Father has not only put all things under Jesus’ feet, but “has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23). As members of the Church, we are members of Christ’s body while he is the head, and so in some sense we are joined to him in his heavenly location. The epistle goes on to confirm this impression. Having been baptized into Christ, we have died already in some fashion, being joined to Christ who died for us. God has, the epistle says, “made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:5–6). So, as it turns out, you did have some claim to going up with Jesus after all – but perhaps instead of holding his hand, you *were* his hand, or his knee, or his toe.

It’s an astonishing thought, that we are already raised and ascended with Christ. What it gives us, I would suggest, is enormous confidence in God’s power and love. God has desired to grant us salvation and a heavenly inheritance, and has been able to do this through his Son Jesus Christ. It also assures us that we are joined to the one who rules over all things, so that no angel or power or height or depth can ever come between us and the love of God (to borrow the language of Romans for a moment).

To understand ourselves as already raised and ascended with Christ is also an unsafe thought, it has to be said, and not all of the Pauline literature would approve. After Jesus' ascension, the disciples still needed to await the gift of the Spirit before they could go out and preach, and it is only through the many gifts of the Spirit to the members of Christ's body that the Church can be sustained to carry out its ministry and mission. Nor is the Church the endpoint, for it looks forward to the fullness of the Reign of God when Jesus returns from heaven in glory.

Even within the letter to the Ephesians, there are persistent reminders that the story is not over yet. The body of Christ, the Church, may be in the heavens, but this does not protect us from all harm. In the cosmic scheme of the heavens, there are evil authorities, wicked powers, and bad spirits that can lead us astray (Eph 6:12), and we know all too well that the Church is not immune to their lures. We need the gifts of the Spirit, sent by Jesus after his ascension, so that the prophets, the pastors, the teachers, and each of us with our own spiritual gifts can build up the body of Christ to its full height (Eph 4:7–13). God is strong, but to receive his protection we need to wear the armour of God – truth, righteousness, evangelism, faith, salvation, and the divine Word (Eph 6:10–17). We are already risen and ascended, yes, but we are also still on Earth, to read and ponder this letter. Together with its first addressees, may we be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know God and the hope to which we have been called (Eph 1:17–18).

So tonight as we celebrate the Lord's ascension, we are poised between heaven and earth ourselves, in faith and hope. We trust that the Holy Spirit works within us. We are confident that Christ has been exalted by the Father and is the head of the Church, far exceeding any Church leaders on Earth, and furthermore, that he cares for the Church as his own body. And we believe that God holds us all in love and has planned our salvation in Christ since the beginning of creation.