

## Ascension

Belief in the resurrection of our Lord was based on the many times he appeared to people for a period of time after Easter Sunday. The people he appeared to are listed in various places in the new Testament. The time had to come when the disciples had to learn to cope with his new way in his being present to them: invisible, intimate – so intimate that he would be living with the Father in their hearts and souls.

That time came when he made his last appearance to them as a group. They were discussing the reports of his appearances when suddenly he appeared in the midst of them. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus assured them that it was really him. Moreover to assure them that the bodily figure they were looking at was real he invited them to touch him and asked them for something to eat. They gave him a piece of fish which he ate in front of them. He then spoke to them about how to interpret the Scriptures so that they could understand how prophecies about him had been fulfilled. And he gave them some brief instructions: they would be the witnesses to his life and death and resurrection, preach forgiveness of sins from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. But first they must wait to be clothed with the power from on high which will give them the courage and the wisdom to take on the task he gave them. He then took them to the outskirts of the town, blessed them, rose up into the sky disappearing from their sight.

The ascension therefore was the last of Jesus' appearances to his disciples as a group. And by ending that appearance with a vision of his going up to heaven, which was believed to be a place somewhere up in the sky, it was made clear to them that this was indeed the end of the former relationship they had had with him. Up to that point, they must have thought of him as living in some secret place somewhere, appearing now here, now there. From now on they will think of him as being in heaven, sitting at the right hand of his Father, triumphant ruler of the universe, truly the king of all creation. The ascension was therefore always associated with Christ's entry as the risen man of the cross into his eternal heavenly glory and triumph.

All of that would have been conceived within their understanding of how the universe was structured. In Jesus' time there were three main parts of it. At the bottom was the realm of the dead. In the middle was the realm of the living – our earth. At the top were the heavens, of which there were several, God's place being the topmost one, the "heaven of the heavens". Each of these were conceived of as real places. So for the disciples before the Ascension Jesus was in some place on this earth but they did not know where. He was different from the Jesus they knew in that he could make himself unrecognisable, walk through closed doors, appear in different places with the ease that someone bound by space and time could not do.

Clearly Jesus' body was no longer limited by space and time as we know it. His body was an energy structure created by love that would permit nothing to exist within that body that would be an obstacle to the closest possible unity between persons. From the moment he died, therefore, he rose from the dead and found himself in the immediate presence of the Father he so loved. John's Gospel pictures Jesus' crucifixion as the moment when his glory would be revealed. For his being lifted up on the cross is seen by John as the beginning of an upward movement that continued from the cross to his heavenly Father.

The appearances of Christ, therefore, ending with the ascension were not occasions when Jesus had to leave heaven to show himself to one or more people. Heaven is not a place. It is an unimaginable experience of joy and happiness derived from love. Jesus was present to all of his disciples from the moment of his resurrection. And the way he was present was through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love that bound him and his Father together. Hence his disciples had to become aware of the fact that Jesus will be present to them always through that Spirit. One thing remained to take place therefore to complete his work and that was to pour out that Spirit on his followers. We celebrate that event on Pentecost Sunday.

A widespread misconception about the ascension is that he was going back to being God. The truth is that he never stopped being God while on this earth and he will never stop being a human being in heaven. It's an extraordinary thought that few people are alert to: a human being became an irrevocable member of the trinity: or to put it differently, when Jesus became a human being God irrevocably became one of us. Therefore, if we had the genealogical information, we could work out our biological relationship to the second person of the trinity: For Jesus had human relatives: aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. And each of us probably has a biological relationship to him, even if it is being the umpteenth cousin, a thousand times removed, of Jesus: which means that you are an umpteenth cousin, a thousand times removed, of God. And since we all stem ultimately from the Father of Jesus, he is our great, great great, grandfather. Calling God our Father is therefore more than a metaphor: it is rooted in the fusion that took place between humanity and divinity at the time of the incarnation.

After Jesus' ascension we are told the disciples stood staring afterwards at the sky. Suddenly two men in white appeared alongside them and said why are you staring at the sky? Why indeed. For Jesus is not to be found exclusively in this place rather than another place. He is to be found in our neighbour, especially the poor the lonely, the hungry, imprisoned and so on. He identifies himself with us, especially when we are in need and asks us to be on the lookout for him in other persons. Because he sees all of us as his brothers and sisters he wants us to do so as well. Apart from helping others we are all called to have reverence for others and treat them with respect. If we follow his wishes our eyes will turn to the skies not in search of Jesus but to enjoy and be overawed by the beauty and power of the God who gave us the heavens and the earth, the entire universe, its galaxies and wonders – gave it all to us for absolutely nothing.