

## The Ascension of the Lord

Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020

Today we celebrate the great Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

*'Meanwhile the eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them. When they saw him they fell down before him, though some hesitated. Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.'* (Mt 28:16–20)

For a long time I always struggled with this Solemnity. As a child I had this image of Jesus randomly floating away from his friends and that this should be a day of sadness rather than rejoicing.



Then as a teenager the chair of governors at our high school, Canon Carter, told us about a pilgrimage he had made to the Holy Land. He was walking in the Galilee region when a local man approached him. The man offered to sell the Canon the very stone on which Jesus stood at the Ascension.

This stone, the priestly pilgrim was told, was the last footprint Jesus ever made on earth and there was a faint outline of his feet on it! When the Canon asked to see this holy relic, he was shown a mass produced 1960's concrete flagstone – with a size 12 builders footprint dented on it. The man took great offense when his holy product was not believed!

I was given a Greek Icon of the Ascension when I was at seminary, similar to the one below. When it was explained to me, I realised the true joy of this great feast.



The first thing that strikes you is the chaos at the bottom of the icon. A huge mass of people, gathered together, all confused and slightly bewildered. Some are looking up, some are turning to their neighbour for answers, while others are waving their hands around. This group is made up of the disciples. And their chaotic behaviour is of course in part to the sadness of seeing Jesus leave. But this is the thing! Jesus is not leaving. He is not moving away; he is not saying goodbye and farewell. He is Ascending. Pope Benedict XVI explained it in this way:

***‘Christ’s Ascension means that he no longer belongs to the world of corruption and death that conditions our life. It means he belongs entirely to God...Since God embraces and sustains the entire cosmos, the Ascension of the Lord means that Christ has not departed from us, but that he is now, thanks to his being with the Father, close to each one of us forever.’ (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI)***

The mystery of the Ascension is not about Jesus moving further away from us but that he is moving closer to us. The Ascension is that moment when the Risen Lord is not subject to being present solely at a fixed place or time. He now transcends time and space. He is with all his faithful, no matter where and no matter when.

The two Angels in white seem to bring some calm and perspective into this crowd of bewildered disciples.

***‘They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, ‘Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky? Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven, this same Jesus will come back in the same way as you have seen him go there.’***

**(Acts 1:10–11)**

The Angels are reminding the disciples of the true and comforting words of Jesus that he would not leave them orphans. He would not abandon them but go and prepare them rooms in his Father’s house. His destination is not a mystery. Jesus clearly said that he was ascending to his Father and their Father. The Angels simply remind the Twelve to recollect and think, the Ascension is not the conclusion, the final goodbye because the story of love is never ending.

As always, our Blessed Mother in her silence speaks volumes and in her subtle way shows us her children how to act in the face of this mystery. She stands at the centre of the crowd with her hands raised in prayer. A prayer directed to her Son who sits above in majesty. Her face is not expressing confusion or frustration like the disciples. Why? Since the earliest days Mary has always been attentive and focused on the words and actions of her son Jesus and their significance.

***‘He [Jesus] then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart.’ (Lk 2:51)***

In Mary's contemplation, quiet and stillness every word and action of her son Jesus has been treasured in her heart. Our Lady stands at the centre of the icon comforting us and consoling us not to be sad, but to know that the Son is now more close than ever. She knows her boy, she remembers everything he said and did and that his whole life was lived out of love for us. Why would he abandon us now?

In her posture, known as the *Orans* position – simply the position of prayer similar to when I celebrate Mass and pray the Eucharistic prayer – she teaches us to pray and talk to her son because he always hears us and is ever present. I invite you now, as you are reading this reflection to copy Mary and pray. Jesus is with you now, he is waiting in love to receive your prayer from the heart. The Lord is not hovering on a cloud over the Holy Land. He is not trapped in a historical time machine far far away. Because of the Ascension Christ our Lord is here, now, with you at this very moment. Tell him your worries. Ask him for help with this situation. Thank him for the blessings in your life. Ask him for help to be a better disciple.

Finally let's look at the image of Jesus in this Ascension Icon. He is above the chaos at the bottom of the picture and resides in the calm and serenity of heaven. This heavenly and divine peace is emphasised by the blue *mandorla* around him. As we know from the Resurrection Icon a few weeks ago, the *mandorla* reminds us of the Presence and Glory of God Himself. The blue draws your eyes to Jesus and there he sits enthroned and in pure and glorious white regal clothing. He is the King. He is the Victor. He is the Saviour of the world. By his life, death and Resurrection heaven, his kingdom, is open to all who freely choose to believe and follow in his footsteps.

Brothers and Sisters, maybe part of today's festive message is to remember, leaving and ascending are two very different things. A farewell is sad, a movement further away but the Ascension is the opposite. As our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI taught, it is a coming closer, the Risen Lord is truly present to us each and everyday day, unencumbered by time or space. A leaving can be a final ending but the Lord's Ascending is a never ending! Amen.

Happy Feastday!

God Bless and keep praying.

Fr. O'Brien