

SPG#131, Ascension

May 20, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

Today we celebrate the Day of Ascension. It is the last Sunday of the Easter season. Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost. There is a certain transition in this celebration that is an essential part of the mission of Jesus Christ. It is also an essential part of the meaning and beginning of the Church. A good way to get at the Ascension is to get a sense of its setting, its context. Toward that end - some observations:

The book of Acts begins with the Ascension. The book serves as kind of a bridge between the gospels themselves and the early church. Traditionally the book is attributed to the Apostle Luke. Within Acts there is a strong and consistent teaching of the Holy Spirit. Luke is single minded in showing the work of the Spirit in the formation of the church. The first half of the book, after the Ascension, has to do with the first church communities in Jerusalem. The second half has to do with Paul and his missionary journeys. I believe it is true that a serious study of Acts will always be beneficial.

So the Ascension is set in the midst of transition and is in the beginning of a transitional book. Part of the context has to do with the disciples and their journey with Jesus in his ministry, in his moving toward Jerusalem and betrayal, and death, and then resurrection. What a ride it had been for them. If all the healings and miracles had not been enough, after they arrived in Jerusalem, the events just seemed to get bigger and bigger.

The disciples could not take it in when Jesus said he must die. And when he did die, they were shattered with grief. But then there was the empty tomb and their disbelief that he had risen. Then there were the post resurrection appearances where he actually spent time with them after he had risen. At the tomb he said to Mary Magdalene, **Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.**

So, even after the monumental events in and around Jerusalem, there was an indication that more was to come. There was an indication that he would leave again, but this time in a different way. The disciples, I think, were used to not understanding what he said.

But even in their not understanding I think they found that Jesus was a man of his word. They found that what he said would happen did actually wind up happening. So they were used to not comprehending. But by this time they were also used to anticipating. And I think they waited unknowing, uncertain, and yet assured that something else monumental would occur.

So, it was in this general context that today's reading in Acts occurs: the transition between what is recorded in the gospels and the formation of the first churches, and the disciples waiting, uncertain and not comprehending, but anticipating.

In that context we find these words in today's reading:

When they had come together they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'

He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Even with our considering the context of this account, we still need to spend time going over it carefully to gain a fuller understanding. You will note that the disciples asked him, **Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?**

In other words, as Jews of their time, and in anticipation of something else monumental, they wondered if the next big thing was the establishing of a new Israel.

For, in their reading of the prophets a new Messiah was promised, a new kingdom.

But then Jesus, in answering said, **It is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father has set by his own authority.** In other words, it is OK for you to not know about the next big spiritual thing. It is OK and even natural for you to anticipate without fully knowing.

And then he continues, **But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.** As I said before the coming of the Holy Spirit is a prevalent theme for Luke.

And Jesus, in his teaching beforehand had said he would leave so that an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, could come. So when he says, **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,** he is referring to his leaving and to the coming of the Holy Spirit, whose coming is contingent upon his, Jesus,' leaving.

From our vantage point we can look back and say that Jesus was leaving in one way so he could be present in another way. He left as the resurrected Jesus, the ascended Jesus so he could be present in the Holy Spirit. It is this presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit that Luke teaches many times in Acts. And even before the resurrection, Jesus left in the crucifixion through death in order to be present as risen. So now, in the Ascension, he leaves as risen in order to be even more widely present as risen in the Holy Spirit.

This being "more widely present" is evident in the next words that Jesus utters.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. By saying this Jesus is answering the disciples' question about this being the time when the kingdom of Israel would be restored. Because he says, **You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea.** If he had stopped there he would have essentially said that his mission was to Jews only. But then he continues, **and Samaria,** which was not part of the Judaism of that day, **and not only Samaria but to the ends of the earth.**

So then, that was the next big spiritual thing the disciples anticipated but had no words for. Jesus, as risen, would leave in order to be more widely present as risen in the Holy Spirit. And in the lives of followers since then, the Holy Spirit would spread out of Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria across the whole world.

So that then was the next big spiritual thing for the disciples. And as Jesus ascended he told them of it. That could have been it. But Luke is careful to say, **As he was going up two men in white robes were with them.** The men said, **Men of Galilee, why do stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.**

In other words, these two men are saying, "If you thought this ascension was the last big spiritual thing, think again."

And that would prove to be true. For Pentecost would occur with these same people. And since that time, countless deeds of love and service in the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit in many churches would occur. And those events constituted the next big spiritual thing for those people in those events.

Those people who witnessed the Ascension that day are our spiritual ancestors. For we in our lives wait with some uncertainty, but in hope and anticipation for the next big spiritual thing in our lives, in this church of St. Paul's in Grinnell. What will that next big spiritual thing be like? Who knows? But if the Ascension is our teacher, then the next big spiritual thing will be bigger and more wonderful than we can imagine. May it be so.

Amen.

