

Ascension Day

May 13, 2021

Said Mass with Music

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Ephesians 1:15–23; Psalm 47; Luke 24:44–53

In the early sixteenth century, the German artist, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), completed a set of thirty-six woodcuts, which he then printed in a portable devotional book entitled the *Small Passion*. The heart of the work, twenty-three images in all, do indeed depict the events of Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem, from his entry into the city until his death on the cross. But the book might better have been called *The Paschal Mystery*, since its very first image comes from the distant, biblical past, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and its last image is Dürer’s interpretation of the Last Judgment; and, so, the artist has created a visual history of the entire arc of Jesus of Nazareth’s life—from the Annunciation to his Burial—but he has embedded this biography in a visual meditation on the *meaning* of the Christ story. The Son of God becomes Son of Man for a reason, to conquer sin and death and to make it possible for humans to “participate in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Dürer's book helps us to think of Christ's life as a series of movements or passages that take place within a history. It is a human history, but it is also a cosmic history. The eternal Word becomes flesh. Jesus is born. Jesus leaves home and begins his ministry—Dürer even imagines him saying farewell to his mother. At the end of his ministry, he is arrested, suffers, dies, and is buried. But of course, that is not the end of the story. Jesus rises from the dead. He passes from death to life and shares his risen life with his grief-stricken family and followers.

The next passage depicted in Dürer's book is the Ascension, the event that we recall and celebrate today. The artist's treatment of the Ascension is striking. Mary and the disciples have gathered "as far as Bethany" and have formed a circle around a small rise or hill. Some stand, some kneel. Their faces are upturned, in attitudes of prayer, worship, and wonder as they witness Jesus ascend. Dürer communicates this by showing Jesus' feet and the bottom of his tunic, but not his body or face, as Jesus ascends up and out of the frame. The artist is imagining the scene described in today's gospel quite literally: "...he parted from them and was

carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51b). There is an intensely physical quality to this image. This is a leave-taking, a departure. The Risen Lord has a risen body, but it is a body with substance and weight. He leaves his footprints clearly outlined in the dirt of that small hilltop. And so, Dürer gives us one half of the meaning of this feast day: the Ascension marks a change and a passage. It is a loss. For Christians, the Ascension story is prefigured by the poignant story of the prophet Elijah’s departure in the Second Book of the Kings. Elisha, Elijah’s pupil, insists that he will not leave his teacher. He stays with him. They walk and talk together, that most human, everyday thing. Elisha doesn’t want any of this to end. He wants the life he’s known to go on. No end. No change. But change it does. Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11), and Elisha must keep going, in his own way, in this world, to do the will of God.

So, the Ascension is about change and loss. And the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles recognize that the loss is significant and painful for all those who had known Jesus “from a human point of view” (2 Cor 5:16). Jesus ascends out of the frame

of their lives, and they cannot hold onto him or prevent his passage. We read in the Gospel of John, “A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you *will* see me. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” We will hear a lovely, poignant interpretation of this experience of sorrow during Communion, “Ah, just stay, my dearest Life. Ah, don’t flee so soon from me! Your farewell and Your early departure bring me the greatest of all sorrows. Ah, truly, just stay awhile here, otherwise I will be completely undone with grief” (Aria: *Ach, bleibe doch*, from Canata 11 of Johann Sebastian Bach).

So, this is the Ascension’s first meaning. It symbolizes all those places we are afraid, uncertain, confused, and filled with sorrow or grief. It is a sign of all those moments when the future frightens us, and hope seems impossible.

But this feast has a second, further, meaning, and it is its deepest meaning. In the story of the Ascension in the first chapter of Acts, the disciples stand transfixed, “gazing into heaven” as

Jesus departs, and two angelic figures address them saying, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (1:11). The angels tell the disciples to wake up. The disciples, like Elisha, must go on, though their teacher is gone. But they are not just offering the disciples a life of grim, stoic endurance. The angels remind them that their departed rabbi is the Risen Lord who still lives and who has promised them that their present and their future will *include* him. That is the message of today’s gospel: before Jesus ascends, he *blesses* them, and his blessing, his gift, is to assure his followers that God is about presence, not departure or absence. God will not abandon them. He speaks of the Father’s promises to them. He assures them that they are to be surrounded, upheld, even *clothed* with power from on high through the gift of the Spirit.

This is why Saint Paul tells us in our second reading that hope is the Christian calling, our calling. Paul speaks here of Christ seated in the heavenly places, far above the realm of human striving, discord, and the thirst for acquisition,

power, and control. And in hearing this we might think that the apostle is imagining Christ in a physical *place*, a place distant from human concerns, needs, sorrows, and joys. But that is not at all the image with which he leaves us, "...he has put all things under his feet and has made him his head over all things for the church, which is his body the fulness of him who *fills all in all*" (1:22).

So, it seems to me that the truest meaning of the Ascension is this: the story of Jesus Christ is not the story of a charismatic but mortal hero, who lived, who died, and is dutifully remembered with fondness and respect, but whose memory is destined to fade as all worldly things do. Rather, it is a story that tells of a passage from life to death and *then* to that life which does not and can never die, God's eternal life, God's eternal love, a love stronger than all our hatreds and discord, a love stronger than despair, a love that has the power to "fill all in all."

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