

Ascension Day  
 Acts 1.1-11; Lk 24.49-53  
 21 May 2009  
 Fr. Patrick S. Allen

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We few – we happy few – keep this evening the Feast of the Ascension. In our Anglican Prayer Book tradition, it is one of the seven “Principle Feasts” of the Christian Year, right in there with Easter and Christmas – a major holy day, a day bequeathed to us from ancient times for celebration and joy and, yes, *feasting*. Indeed, I myself have a frozen pizza awaiting me after Mass at home. (You laugh, but it’s a *supreme* pizza.)

St. Augustine tells us that this feast is actually of Apostolic origin, and that it is, he said, “that Festival which confirms the grace of all the Festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished.”

In the Eastern Church, it is now generally referred to as the “*Analepsis*” – the “taking up” – but anciently, and some places still, it is called the “*Episozomene*” – the “Salvation.”

“The Salvation.” Ponder that: Deep, deep in the long Christian tradition, the event celebrated on this day is understood to constitute in a singular way the fullness of redemption; it is *Salvation*.

And consider Augustine’s words, that without this Feast, “the profitableness – *the benefit* – of every festival would have perished.” By which of course he meant not our liturgical celebrations, but the mighty works of God in Christ which those celebrations commemorate: the mystery of our Lord’s Incarnation; his holy Nativity and Submission to the law; his Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation; his Agony and Bloody Sweat; his Cross and Passion; his precious Death and Burial; his glorious Resurrection – all of it, Augustine tells us, without the Ascension is “nothing worth.”<sup>i</sup>

Maybe you’re now thinking that Fr. Allen is really giving us the Ascension hard sell. Or maybe you’re thinking that I’m engaging in a little passive-aggressive scolding of those who have skipped Mass today. Well, sure I am. But that’s not all – our motives are never pure. And the better angel of my nature really just wants to report to you on the Faith of the Church – what it is – and then to try in some meager measure to come to grips with it myself. Because it should be obvious enough that the Ascension has fallen on hard times. I didn’t see a single Facebook status update or Twitter Tweet today saying “Billy Bob Smith wishes a happy Ascension Day to all!” Although I would spare its being trivialized by Twitter, we do need to recover the Ascension’s mystery and glory, for the hope its promise brings (to say nothing of our *feasting*).<sup>ii</sup>

St. Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that forty days after our Lord’s Resurrection, “as the disciples were looking on, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took them from their sight.” That is how the very first Christians experienced the event: the Crucified and Risen Lord makes his great transition from earthly life to heavenly life, without – and this is the glory of this Feast – *without leaving his earthly life behind*.

The Ascension tells us that the Incarnation is not over. It continues, and continues forever. In the Ascension of our Lord we see the fulfillment of our redemption, because our humanity – our full, embodied, flesh and blood, earthy and *of-the-dust-were-you-formed* humanity is taken into the very life of God.

So this, I think, was St. Augustine's point: in the other feasts, in the Jesus-events they commemorate, God-in-Christ gives himself to us and for us, *so that* in the Ascension of our Lord Jesus ("the firstborn of many brothers") he can then take us back to himself – really, truly, and forever.

It turns out that Redemption is a bigger and deeper thing than we sometimes suppose. We would be content enough – of course we would – to have the consolations Christ's victory over death, to be set free finally from our sins, to have our sorrows and tears wiped away; and we have those consolations, and they are real and life transforming and to be treasured and pondered in our hearts. But God will do more. In Christ, God has joined our humanity to his Divinity. God will have us – earthy, formed-from-the-dust us – share in his own life, the Divine life of the Most Blessed Trinity.

So the Ascension is a great reversal. There was a time when, in the cool of the day, the Lord God walked in the garden and shared his Presence with our first parents; then the garden became, in the most literal sense, Heaven on Earth – really Paradise.

In the Ascension, what we lost the Lord God has restored, but not only restored to the prelapsarian *status quo* – but actually deepened, improved, and extended infinitely. The garden was from time to time and in a limited, attenuated way, Heaven on Earth. But in the Ascension, Jesus has taken Earth to Heaven in his own Being, and so the Lord God joins us not for a temporary if blessed visit, but incorporates our life into his life, which is eternal life. Earth and ashes and dust, minerals and molecules, atoms, quarks, and leptons – all is taken up into the Divine glory.

That is the Ascension's Gospel, and therefore the disciples "returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the Temple praising God." And may it be so with us.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf the Great Litany

<sup>ii</sup> This, I believe, is the first "Twitter" reference from the pulpit of the Church of the Holy Communion, which officially means that Twitter is so five minutes ago.