

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 21.
May 21, 2023

Ascension 2023

Of all the Major Feasts of Our Lord, the Ascension is probably the most problematic. In the first place, none of the evangelists really makes a big deal about it; they allude to Our Lord's being taken up, but they certainly do not give the event the attention they do to the Transfiguration, say, or His baptism or His birth. And then, the timing is odd – even we can feel that: here we are, ten days away from Pentecost and the end of the Easter season: all of a sudden the Risen Christ disappears, and we, like guests at a wedding party the bridegroom has suddenly abandoned, are left standing around with our party hats on, wondering what to do with ourselves. And if *we* feel uneasy about it liturgically, imagine how the disciples themselves must have felt! Abandoned, confused, dumbfounded.

The real problem with the Ascension though, I believe, is none of the above, but rather two assumptions that we bring to it. First, we assume that it is an ending – the final event in Christ's earthly ministry – when, in fact, it is a transitional point marking an end, yes, but also, and even more importantly, a beginning – something that is strongly suggested by the fact that it does not figure prominently at the end of any of the gospels, but is highlighted at the beginning of the history of the Church as recorded in Acts. Second, we assume that we are meant to focus on what is happening to Christ in this event, when in fact, what is happening to the disciples is just as important – maybe even more so.

If we think for a moment on the track record of the Twelve as recorded in the Gospels, we have to conclude that it is not a very impressive one, in fact, it is pretty close to disastrous. For all the enthusiasm and good faith with which they responded to Our Lord's call, they never really understood what He was all about. Yes, they realized that He was God's Chosen One, but they really had no idea of what that meant. They were completely caught up in their own expectations and too blinded by them to fully grasp what they had gotten themselves into. On that final trek up to Jerusalem, they were full of hope, squabbling amongst each other as to who would hold what position in the restored Israel they were sure Jesus was about to establish. And then, of course, when the crunch came, one of them betrayed Him and the rest went running off every which way, leaving Jesus to His fate.

To page 2

From page 1

And then He rises from the dead and calls for them back to Him. They are, of course, ecstatic, euphoric; but they don't appear to have learned much. In their joy they apparently quite forget His somber pronouncements about cups from which they will surely drink, baptisms with which they will be baptized; they forget about the Cross, fail to grasp what it meant. So we find them, forty days after the Great Event, still fixated on that restoration of Israel. Perhaps they are getting a bit impatient – God, after all, *has* definitely come down on the side of Jesus against the powers of this world; when, then, does Jesus plan to take over?

And they ask Him about it. Jesus tells them, in essence, that the timing of these things is really no business of theirs; that their task, at this point, is to return to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit; and with that, He up and leaves them, He ascends. They stand gawking for a moment, dumbfounded, then are told by two conveniently positioned angels, to cease gawking: their job is not to stand stupidly staring into space, but to do what Jesus commanded them to do, return to Jerusalem and wait.

Which is precisely what they do. They return, they pray, and they wait. And in so doing they perform the first act of truly Christian discipleship. Up to now they have been followers of the Rabbi Jesus, disciples of an earthly “guru,” of a person present to them in the flesh, a person with whom they felt free to argue, haggle, and whom they abandoned in the end. Now, they perform an act of obedience to their Risen Lord who is present to them only in their faith and they step into a totally uncharted future; they have no idea of what will happen to them, all their certainties, their expectations have been dismissed as irrelevant.

It is at this point, I believe, that the apostles, or at least Peter, begin to understand. Whether it is a sudden moment of illumination or a gradual dawning, who knows, but obviously a sea change has occurred. And it's what happens between the Ascension and Pentecost that reveals that this change has taken or is taking place.

One can only imagine the intensity of those days before Pentecost, as the community finally began to grasp that this had to do with far more than the restoration of a Davidic Kingdom; that the Cross was not simply a messy obstacle that had had to be overcome, but the very instrument of victory; that their vocation, the call they had answered was not to a seat in the cabinet of an earthly kingdom, but something so incredible it could hardly be imagined. All this must have been breaking in on them as they gathered together in prayer.

And then Peter rises to address the small community, calling to order the first council of the Church. Jesus is no longer physically present, so if there is going to be any

To page 3

From page 2

speaking at all, someone else has to do it. And it falls to Peter. He briefly summarizes the events that have occurred so far – the first Christian narrative – and calls upon the group to select a successor to Judas. It is a momentous event. The church as organized by Jesus had been crippled by Judas' defection, and here it is being restored, made whole again - a sort of resurrection if you will – and it is not Jesus the individual who is doing this, but Peter and the apostles, acting on their own for the first time with the authority He has left them. Thus what is to be the locus of Christ's physical presence among us is made ready for the coming of the Spirit.

So this brief council over which he presided marks the first autonomous act of our community. Now, like the reconstituted bodies in Ezekiel's valley, the Church awaits the coming of the Holy Ghost to bring it to life as Christ's new body in the world.

If the Pentecost is the birth of the Church, then surely the Ascension is the beginning of that birthing.

And so it is the Ascension that makes it possible for us to gather as the Body of Christ. It is the Ascension of Christ's humanity into God that allows Him to become universal, that makes it possible for us to meet Him in each other, makes it possible to meet Him in the Sacrament we are about to receive. Problematic, then, as the Feast may be, it is certainly one we do well in celebrating.

SAINTS:

Pope Francis recognises 21 Copts beheaded by Islamic State as martyrs. Pope Francis on Thursday announced that 21 Coptic Orthodox Christians beheaded by Islamic State in Libya in 2015 are being recognised as martyrs by the Vatican. The 21 Copts, 20 Egyptians and a Ghanaian, were lined up on Feb. 15, 2015 in orange jumpsuits on a beach in the Libyan city of Sirte, which Islamic State then controlled. The Islamist group posted a video of the killings, showing the men praying as they died. Copts comprise about 10% of Egypt's mostly Muslim population and there are small Coptic Christian communities throughout the Middle East and Africa. They have long been attacked by Islamist militants who see them as heretics. [Reuters]