

Locked down and looking up

The Ascension of the Lord – May 16, 2021

World Communications' Day

Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mk 16:15-20.

“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” (Acts 1:11)

Prologue: In biblical, directional symbolism, to be high is good and low is bad. The cosmology of biblical times was three-tiered: heaven is high, up; hell is low, down, and the earth in-between. Anyway, the point to be remembered is that Jesus physically leaves his disciples after his death-and-resurrection so as to enter fully into God's heavenly glory. Now, more than ever before, he is present always, everywhere, to everyone. His ascending into heaven and assurance of leading us there, too, is very consoling, especially amidst the raging pandemic.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The Ascension cannot be detached from Jesus' resurrection. The apostles persistently proclaimed that, “Jesus is risen *and* ascended into heaven.” This is clear in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. However, today's first reading—that prefaces the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ (authored by evangelist Luke)—is the only place in Scripture where we have the Ascension dated 40 days *after* the resurrection. Here too, the number forty is not to be taken literally and historically but symbolically as a holy period of revelation. Be that as it may, what's important is that Jesus “*was taken up*” and enthroned “*at the right hand of God*”. Luke makes two clear divisions in his writings: first, in his Gospel of 24 chapters, he describes the words and works of the historical Jesus up to his death and resurrection, with mention of his being “carried up onto heaven” (Lk 24:51); second, in his ‘Acts’ he describes the words and works of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, as it gives effective witness to Christ's life. Therefore, in the Acts, Jesus' disciples receive the baton from Him, so to say, and must complete the race that he has begun. The Risen Lord instructs them: “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” (v.8). Beginning with Jerusalem, they must fan out and proclaim Good News to the ends of the earth.
2. The Ascension is the work of God, the Father: Jesus' *Abba*. The phrase “was taken up” is what is termed a ‘theological passive’ – used in a similar sense, for instance, in the assumption of prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11). This means that God, the Father raises Jesus, takes him up into the divine glory that was eternally his, and reinstates him as ‘Lord’. The title ‘Lord’ and “right hand of God” imagery (see Ps 110:1) indicates Jesus' sovereignty and kingship. His ascension also reminds us that he is the mediator between God and human beings and judge of all peoples. The language used to describe our Lord's ascension—namely, heaven, lifted up, cloud, right hand of God, power, glory, authority, etc.—suggests a definitive break of Christ's ascended state as compared to Jesus' incarnate state. This makes believers look heavenward or upward, so to say, with the hope that we shall also be where He—the head and firstborn of his sisters and brothers—has already reached. However, while looking heavenwards, we must remember the mild reproach of the angels: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (v.11). Looking up must be complemented and completed with a looking around—especially during these days of the ‘pandemic lockdown’.

3. The Acts as well as today's Gospel passage are mission-oriented rather than mere revelations of Jesus' present ascended state. Luke's mention of the disciples' mission "to the ends of the earth" is reiterated by Mark's recording of Jesus' commission: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (v.15). It is acknowledged by scripture scholars that the original text of the Gospel according to Mark ended at 16:8, and verses 9-20 are a later addition. Be that as it may, this Markan 'missionary mandate' is canonical and binding down to our day. The expanse of evangelization is phenomenal—to all of creation. Heeding their ascended Lord's command, the disciples: "*went out* and proclaimed the good news everywhere" (v.20). Their words will find embodiment in concrete '*signs*'—casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, healing the sick, etc. (vv.17-18)—and, they will be witnesses even to the extent of sacrificing their lives for the Lord and Master.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Ascension Theme: St Paul prays to God for the Ephesians he has catechized and who have accepted Christ as their Saviour and Lord. He prays that they might be given the deep wisdom to realize what God has done through Jesus Christ, and "the hope to which he [God] has called you" (v.18). God "raised him [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (v.20). This glorious act of God is the assurance for all believers that the fullness of life revealed by the "Head" (v.22) of the Body called Church is theirs to reach, as well. In other words, we can rejoice that heaven is our inheritance, thanks to God's love revealed in Jesus.

A Current Concern and a Challenge:

A Covid Concern: These days of the pandemic's 2nd wave all over India, people are suffering and dying by the thousands. In the media we have glimpses of hell, so to say, rather than heaven. Amidst the suffering, pain, darkness and death, how do we bring hope to all those suffering and those who have lost loved ones, so suddenly and unexpectedly?

A Communications' Challenge: Celebrating the 55th World Communications Day, Pope Francis uses Jesus' "*Come and See*" (Jn 1:46) call to exhort Christians to be evangelists communicating their firsthand experiences of Our Lord, Jesus. He writes: "The Gospel comes alive in our own day, whenever we accept the compelling witness of people whose lives have been changed by their encounter with Jesus. For two millennia, a chain of such encounters has communicated the attractiveness of the Christian adventure. The *challenge that awaits us, then, is to communicate by encountering people, where they are and as they are.*" Are we ready to go out of ourselves through creative means despite 'lockdowns'—online and offline—to reach and touch the needy "as and where they are", bringing hope, love and peace to them?

In Lighter Vein: A newcomer in heaven was fascinated to see big groups of people celebrating life in heaven. They looked so peaceful, happy and contented. Being shown around by St Peter he pointed out to one large group and asked, "Who are those people?" Peter answered, "Those are the Hindus." The man was quite surprised. Proceeding a little further, he asked: "And what about those people over there?" Peter replied very casually, "Those are the Muslims." Finally, they came to a huge walled-enclave from wherein music, singing and clapping could be heard. The newcomer asked, "And who are they?" Peter smiled and said, "Shhhh... They are the Catholics and they think that they are the only ones in heaven." Let's remember the angels' words, "This same Jesus who has been taken up [to heaven] ... will come back!" and put at his "*right hand*" those who have loved and served the '*least*' of his sisters and brothers (see Mt 25:31ff). Will we be judged worthy to sit at his right side in that heaven prepared for us all?
