

# “Our Ascended Lord”

Acts 1: 1-11

Ascension Sunday, Boise, 2021 [after Redding, 2013]

We observe the Feast of the Ascension on the Sunday that follows it this year. Next year, when we have a place for midweek services without having to pay extra, we will observe the feast on the day itself, which always falls on a Thursday, forty days after Easter, the period of time when the risen Lord made appearances to His followers following His Resurrection. And that returns to us the very beginning of The Acts of the Apostles. After the Ascension, the story shifts from the acts of Jesus to those of His disciples. The account in our first reading is of the risen Lord’s visible departure from them on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. That departure explains why we do not see Jesus appearing to us today in our world, even though He is very much alive in it. The departure of His body in a cloud, the angels explained, signified that the Church would not see Him again until His return on a cloud at the end.

But we don’t really call the event His “departure,” do we? The main truth signified at this feast is not that Jesus left, but, rather, that He *ascended* His Throne in Heaven “at the right hand of the Father.” “Ascension,” we Americans would do well to learn, refers to the ceremony of a monarch’s taking the Throne at his or her coronation. We don’t say that a climber “ascends” a mountain, unless we are trying to be cute. We say that he climbs, or goes up, a mountain. We might speak of an airplane or rocket’s “ascent.” But in standard, idiomatic English, “ascension” is a term reserved for coronations. We Americans have inaugurations, not coronations. So it makes sense that our hymns for Ascension Sunday were written by Englishmen — Charles Wesley for the Processional and Bishop Christopher Wordsworth, a cousin of the poet Wm. Wordsworth, for the Recessional. The last one sounds more like a victory anthem sung after a king

has returned from war:

See the Conqu'ror mounts in triumph;  
See the King in royal state,  
Riding on the clouds, his chariot,  
To his heav'nly palace gate.

Jesus returns to Heaven after His defeat of the Devil, sin, and death. He triumphed over them all, and so now takes His Throne to administer the Kingdom on His Father's behalf.

This is the meaning of Christ's Ascension: Jesus lives again after His death. Having triumphed over death, He is Lord. He reigns. Despite the problems we have here with our governments, Christ rules the nations. His Kingdom spreads by the preaching of the Gospel, and men and women everywhere are moved by the Spirit He has sent to worship Him and the Father through Him. He will return visibly to govern here, bringing Heaven with Him, after He has, as the Psalmist prophesied, made all enemies His footstool [Ps 110].

The feast we will observe next Sunday, Pentecost (or Whitsunday) will fill in some of the details. Christ, even though He has visibly departed for Heaven is not now absent on earth. He is present among us in His Spirit. The Church is His Body, and we, His hands and feet, do His work. If you are a believer and live by the Spirit given you at your baptism, then look no farther for Christ. He is in you, and you are in Him. If you have not yet been made aware of that reality, that Christ Our Lord reigns in you, and you with Him, then discover it now. A Christian does not merely follow Christ. He or she bears Him. It is time, then, to begin acting like a king. Secure in God's love, you can issue a king's pardon to those who have wronged you. You have the wealth of God Himself in your soul, so you can be generous. You have armies of angels to protect you, so you need not fear an adversary, not even death. You can live in the world amid its dangers, of which the Covid virus is hardly the greatest. You can, in heart and mind, ascend to Heaven and sit with Christ at the right hand of God.

What does it mean to live in a Kingdom governed by Christ? It means to live under a polity, a particular kind of government. The words “polity” and “politics” derive from the Greek word for city, “polis.” In the 5th century, St Augustine of Hippo wrote a very large book called “The City of God.” In it he gives a Christian interpretation of history, explaining how the Kingdom (or God’s City) interacts with, and yet remains distinct from, “the city of man.” The pagans regarded Rome as “the eternal city.” So they were shocked when Alaric’s Goths invaded, looted, and trashed it, in retaliation for the imperial government’s breaking a promise it had made to them. That might happen to any other city but not to Rome,” the people thought. “Uhn, uh,” Augustine wrote. “Rome is not the eternal city. Only the City of God is,” and by that he meant the Kingdom. Only God’s City and its polity (or government) will last forever. We can, as Christians, participate in the government and politics of the earthly city where we reside, but please understand that eventually that city will fall, Augustine said. But Christ’s Kingship and Kingdom — they will endure.

The Kingdom that Christ governs, and to which we Christians belong, is eternal, but it is not static. Like all successful governments, it grows and develops. Look at how our own country has grown since its founding. Look at how it has developed under multiple presidential administrations. Well, the Kingdom of God has had just two administrations, and it has grown and developed much under each of them, especially the second. The first administration of the Kingdom was under the Old Covenant, and you read about it in the Old Testament. You read there how God extended His government to just one nation, Israel. It was administered by His Word and Spirit through kings, priests, Levites, and tribal elders. Under David and Solomon, the territory that was governed very nearly matched what had been promised to Israel’s forefather, Abraham.

The second administration of the Kingdom was begun by Christ after His Resurrection. He commissioned the Apostles and empowered them with the Holy

Spirit. He ascended the Throne in Heaven at the right hand of His Father. He breathed from on high on the rest of His followers assembled in Jerusalem. They were to extend the Kingdom far beyond the bounds of Israel by the preaching of the Gospel to all nations. The Messiah's Throne is not found in any one nation. Rather, it is exalted above the earth to indicate that the Kingdom now includes men and women from every nation. And just as there was Law in the first administration, so there is now in the second. The Law we are to obey in Christ's universal Kingdom is based on the principle of *agape*, on the perfect charity that characterizes the relations of the Trinity. It is the Law, St Paul tells us, that God writes on our hearts.

This polity the Bible describes, the polity of God's own City, is certainly monarchy. But don't think for a minute that it takes us back to an earlier period in history; for it is a monarchy in which all who acknowledge it can participate. St John, in the final book of the Bible, Revelation, states that Christ "has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us to be a Kingdom, and priests unto God" [Rev 1: 6]. Since the Reformation we have heard much about "the priesthood of all believers," but not much about the kingship of all believers. Neither phrase indicates that the Church is a democracy, which is a polity found in the city of man. Christians are priests and kings only because they have been made by the Spirit to participate in the Priesthood and Kingship of Christ. To belong to Christ's Body and live by His Spirit is to enjoy the entire fruit of His victory over the Devil, sin, and death. It is to share the Messiah's Reign fully and to assist in its administration.

Now this is not just an idealized picture that the NT gives us. What St John and St Peter and St Paul teach about the Kingdom is not merely theory. You all have opportunities to assist in the administration of God's Kingdom right here in your local church. We have a priest and a deacon with particular duties, but we need all of you working, in order to spread the Kingdom in our locality. When the

Bishop laid hands on you at Confirmation, you were appointed to the order of the laity, and given the gifts of the Spirit to perform the ministry that belongs to it. The work you do on the Altar Guild or Vestry or Fellowship Committee or as an Acolyte, Reader, greeter, singer, or teacher in the Sunday School — it is all the work of royalty, because it is work done for the Kingdom and by the power of the King's Spirit. When you worship here on Sunday morning, you join the highest orders of angels in their task, chanting "Holy, holy, holy" before the Thrones of the Divine Father and Son. And you are praising God with His own Breath, the Holy Spirit. Yes, your local church, if it is doing its job, is an integral part of the Kingdom. It is the point of contact that people in this community have with the whole Church Militant on earth, which has communion with the Church Triumphant in Heaven. The local church is also the place whence the Kingdom reaches out to include others whom God has chosen out of many nations for His own state under His own polity.

So be glad in Christ the King's Ascension. What it means is that you, as a believer, are a minister of the Highest, and bear awesome power.

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