



Acts 1:1-11

Luke 24:44-end

Although our Prayer Book lists Our Lord's Ascension, which was last Thursday, as one of the seven principal feasts of the Church year, it largely remains a liturgical celebration in search of its own identity.

Ascension has never succeeded in capturing our imagination in the same way as Christmas or Easter. The story as told in Acts or the Gospels lacks the sheer drama of Good Friday or the Resurrection. Nor is it helped by the diverging accounts in Scripture. The narratives we just heard from Acts and in the Gospel are very similar, with Jesus taking leave of his apostles on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, but they were both written by Luke. Matthew places the event up north, in Galilee, as does John, but John merely talks about Our Lord walking away from the disciples, accompanied by himself and Peter. The original shorter ending of Mark's Gospel, more authentic than the later addition, doesn't mention the Ascension at all.

Not surprisingly, no popular religious culture has developed around Ascension. I have yet to receive an Ascension present all wrapped up in shiny paper and a bow. No one ever thinks about dressing up in white for Ascension, like wearing red for Pentecost. We don't do an Ascension egg hunt in the garden here, and the concept of an Ascension pageant, or a skit by the Emmanuel Puppet Company for a family service on Ascension Eve isn't even considered.

Even in the world of sacred art, which does so much to enhance our worship, images – at least, artistically satisfying images – of the Ascension are surprisingly few. Why is this so, I asked an artist friend, who replied: "Did you ever try to depict someone disappearing? It's not so easy." Point taken.

Nonetheless, the Ascension is more than some liturgical celebration squeezed in between Easter and Pentecost. Had Christ's earthly ministry ended right before his mountain-top transfiguration in the company of Peter, James and

John, our worship would look very different. In fact, we might not even be here at all. We would remember Jesus of Nazareth as an extraordinary, even radical, figure known for some equally extraordinary acts of healing and teaching, possibly a prophet. And that would be it. No one would think of claiming Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God.

Ascension is the culmination of the period in Our Lord's life that starts with the Transfiguration, and continues with his arrest and torture, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. This string of events sets him apart from any other member of the human race, before or since. His dual nature – fully human, fully divine – becomes apparent in ways that his apostles could not fully comprehend until Jesus explained it to them after his Resurrection. We too struggle to get our finite minds around things so far beyond the pale of our everyday lives.

One thing, however, stands out in all the accounts of the Ascension: the complete change in the disciples. They have experienced their own transfiguration, transformed from dim-witted uncomprehending, often selfish, cowards into bold men ready to speak out. They have suffered ridicule and even persecution, and something of them also has died on Calvary, only to be reborn in the new faith they are called upon to spread.

By the time of the Ascension, the apostles get it. Luke relates that “they returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.” With the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we celebrate next week, will come the fulfillment of their Lord's constantly reiterated promise: “I will not leave you alone. I am with you always until the end of the age.” They understand that Jesus has returned to where he came from: his heavenly Father. He has accomplished his purposes, what he was sent to do. He has, in a very real sense, gone home.

Admittedly, at the moment, the concept of “home” is beginning to wear a bit thin after weeks of lockdown and self-confinement. Many of us are working from home but find our days unstructured and unproductive. People yearn to be able to travel somewhere – anywhere – to visit relatives and friends, while families holed up at home are apt to find small living spaces a challenge of their own.

In the United States, the term “going home” has long been a euphemism for “dying” – another subject that's all too topical right now. “Going Home” is the

title of the lovely piece that we'll hear Andrew and Shauna play in just a few minutes. It originally comes from Dvorák's New World Symphony, but it proved so popular that it was quickly adapted as an American folk hymn sung at funerals.

But in Biblical times, to "go home" meant exactly that. The Hebrews in the Old Testament were basically a nomadic people, and their identity was closely tied up with where their roots lay. One of God's commandments to Israel in the Book of Leviticus was that they should return, every 50 years, to the land of their ancestors. This was to be a jubilee year, a sabbath year. The land was to lie fallow, and the Hebrews were to subsist on what the soil produced on its own.

There's no evidence in Scripture that this commandment was ever followed. But it's worth reflecting on what God is telling his people here – and that means us as well - not only about who we are, but who God is. I think the reason many of us have found it so difficult to deal with all the quiet time and immobility that have been forced on us these past two months is that we allow ourselves to experience it so seldom. We are a people not of being, but of doing, busy doing all that sowing and reaping that we heard about last week.

The Church is no exception to the rule, and we clergy and laypeople who are hyperactive run the risk of becoming technicians of the sacred, rather than models of the Word and the Way. We all are constantly on the move, working to meet that deadline, then rushing off to Nice or Amsterdam on EasyJet for the weekend on what we ironically call "taking a break". Or we pack our social schedule all week so tight that we arrive back at work Monday utterly exhausted.

Under those circumstances, is it any wonder that God sometimes gets short shrift in our lives? Indeed, how could it be otherwise? Even for us, there are only 24 hours in the day. Of course, we must work, and work hard, to earn our living. Of course, we take joy in going out to dinner or a concert, or visiting new and exotic places. It is not the activities themselves, but the frenetic, relentless pace at which we do them that saps our energy and often deprives us of the very pleasure that we might derive from them.

To go home is not only about a physical setting, it is also to spend time with God and within ourselves. It is to return to that place from which we have come and where we ultimately belong. Jesus repeatedly gives the example of withdrawing to a quiet place to pray, to meditate on his relationship with his heavenly Father and to discern what God would have him to do. To accord his own human will with his Father's divine will was no easier for him than it is for us. Think, for instance, of the wrenching scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Our Lord begs God three times to take away the cup of suffering which he knows awaits him on the Cross?

What is that place within yourself that you call home, where you go to reconnect with your true self? What is the Sabbath space that you have constructed, the little private chapel in your soul that offers you refuge and where you can know God's desire for your life? Perhaps you have taken advantage of this time of confinement to do some spring cleaning in it and remove the cobwebs. We need not, and should not, wait till we leave this earth to go to the place that God has prepared for us. It begins here and now. Jesus showed us the way, through his words and deeds. Home truly is where the heart is, and at the heart of our being lies God. Go home: God is waiting for you there, right now. AMEN

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