

The Ascension of the Lord

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:1-11
<i>Response</i>	God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 1:17-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Go therefore and make disciples of all nations; I am with you always, to the close of the age.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 24:46-53

The second reading for the Solemnity of the Ascension of Christ in Year C comes to us from the opening chapter of the letter to the Ephesians 1:17-23. This is a very famous hymn from Ephesians. Many scholars think it might be an early Christian hymn that Paul has incorporated into the letter. Whether or not that's the case, it is a beautiful and lyrical ode to the mystery of Christ's passion, death, resurrection, and above all, his ascension into glory. So, let's see what it says. Ephesians 1:17-23:

[may] the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under

his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.¹

Now, obviously, there are lots of things we could say about this passage, but because it's the Feast of the Ascension, we want to focus on what it's revealing to us about the mystery of the Ascension. One thing I want to highlight here, number one, is the realized character of the Ascension. What do I mean by realized character?

What I mean is that, although we sometimes forget this fact, especially if we maybe grew up in a Christian tradition that puts a lot of emphasis on the second coming of Jesus at the end of time, it's really crucial to remember that Christ has already triumphed over His enemies. He is already victorious and He is already reigning as king by sitting at the right hand of God the Father. In other words, Christ is already victor, he's already triumphant. We're simply waiting for him to return in glory. That's what's going to happen in the Parousia at the end of time. And so the focus here of Ephesians 1 is on the fact that through the resurrection and ascension, God has accomplished in Christ His plan of salvation that we call the Paschal mystery, his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, and that Christ already sits at the right hand of the Father.

It's not something that's going to happen at the end of time. It's not something that we're waiting to be accomplished. It already is the case because it happened when he raised him from the dead, made him sit at His right hand. And for that reason, here's the key, this is really fascinating, Christ already is

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

All right, pause there. What does that mean? He's above every "rule and authority and power and dominion." Well, in a first century context, those terms that Paul's using are all words for describing the angelic powers. They are different terms that were used in Jewish writings to describe angels. There are different categories, different kinds of angels. You'll see this in the later medieval tradition develop into the different choirs of angels. It's not that refined yet. There isn't a kind of distillation exactly of it, but thrones, powers, dominions, rules, those are all names for invisible angelic powers.

And what Paul is trying to say here in Ephesians 1 is that when Christ ascended into heaven, he wasn't simply vindicated as the messiah, He was also exalted in his humanity, this is really crucial, above all of the angels. He was given a place above all of the invisible angelic powers. Now, the reason that's important is that if you look at Sacred Scripture as a whole, in the order of creation, the angels are superior to human beings. Human beings are creatures of earth. They have bodies, after the fall in particular, they're going to be mortal. So they pass away. They die. Angels are invisible, immaterial, spiritual beings that are immortal. They're higher in nature. They're superior to human beings. But what happens in Christ is that the eternal son, who is superior to all the angels, in a sense, condescends to empty himself, take on a human nature that's beneath him, that's lower than the angels and then in his passion and death puts that human nature to death, raises it up and doesn't just vindicate it, but actually exalts it into a heavenly place above the angelic powers.

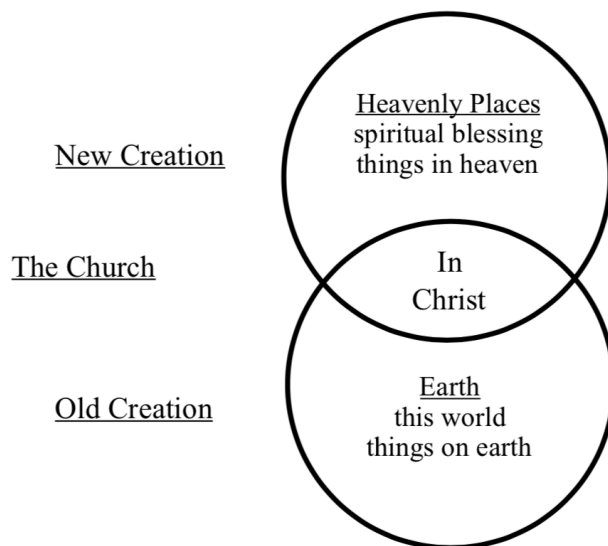
So that now, in a sense, the ordered creation is turned upside down. And whereas the angels in the order of creation are superior to humans, now, in Christ, humanity has been elevated above the angels. This is why Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 6 to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that we are to judge the angels?

Well, you can't judge your superior, right? You can only judge those who are below you or subordinate to you. The mystery of those who are in Christ is that by being in Christ, we've actually been elevated above the angelic powers. That's the first

aspect of the Ascension that's really crucial for us to understand. In the Ascension, one of the aspects of the mystery that's being revealed is that human nature is now above the angels, above the angelic powers. Christ isn't just the king of Israel. He's not even just the king of the world, or the king of humanity. He's the Lord of the angels. He's above the angelic powers. That's the first point.

The second point is that what that means for the Church is that the Church participates in that reign of Christ, in that heavenly reign of Christ. And you can see this by looking at the chart that I've given you. So you've probably heard me talk over and over again in other videos about the two circles of the old creation and the new creation and the ancient Jewish idea that this world, the old creation, would eventually be replaced by a new world, the new creation. One of the keys to understanding St. Paul is recognizing that those two spheres of reality overlap for those who are in Christ. So you have the old that is going to be replaced by the new, but in Christ, we live in between worlds. But what I don't get to emphasize as often because Paul doesn't say it quite as often, is that there's a real sense in which that linear reality of two overlapping circles actually already exists if we put it in a vertical axis.



In other words, you can also think of it as this world, the old creation is the world around us, but then there is a heavenly world that already exists because Christ has

already been exalted into it. So the new creation, in other words, isn't just something we're waiting for at the end of time, it already exists in the heavenly Jerusalem into which Christ has ascended. That's part of the mystery of the Ascension, is the realized eschatology of Christ.

If you look at this chart, what you'll see is that the old creation correlates to this world, the things of the earth. The new creation correlates to what we ordinarily think of as heaven, or what Paul in Ephesians calls the heavenly places, that are full of every spiritual blessing. And the Church being the body of Christ, although in a sense it has one foot in this world, it actually already participates in that heavenly glory. It shares with him in that heavenly glory through the mystery of being the body of Christ. That's why Paul says in verse 21, he's been exalted

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age...

That's the old creation

...but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things...

That's all the universe

...under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.

This is the image of Christ as the cosmic king, as the one who is not just Lord of Israel, or even just Lord of Israel and the nations, but the one who fills all in all, because he is both fully human and also fully divine. And this is what we mean. Every time we pray the creed or we profess, He "is seated at the right hand of the Father." Have you ever wondered why that is an article of faith? Why is that so important for us to profess, that He is seated at the right hand of the Father? And the answer is simple but profound. It's this, that when Christ ascends into heaven, forty days after the resurrection, he doesn't abandon the Church. He doesn't abandon the disciples. Rather, he enters into his glory precisely because

ultimately that's where he wants to bring the Church. He wants to bring them, as members of his body, into the glory of the heavenly places so that he might fill them with every grace and spiritual blessing.

Now, it is a little difficult to wrap our brains around that and sometimes I don't know about you, but when I was a kid and I imagined him sitting at the right hand of the Father, especially if it was an older form of the creed, sitting *on* the right hand of the Father, I was like, "Wait, does the Father have a right hand and Jesus is sitting on it?" I mean, what do we mean by that?" Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the letter to the Ephesians on our passage for today's reading actually addressed this and he explained what was meant by this image of sitting at the right hand of the Father. I'm going to end with just Thomas Aquinas's insight into this mystery.

“Setting him on his right hand” refers to the second element of Christ’s exaltation... Considered in relation to God, he is seated at his right hand; *this is not to be thought of as a bodily organ*—“God is spirit” (John 4:24)—but as a metaphorical way of speaking... *[W]hen we say that Christ Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, it should be understood that according to his humanity he partakes of the Father’s choicest blessings, and according to his divinity it is understood as equality with the Father. “The LORD said to my Lord: sit at my right hand” (Ps 110:1)...*²

Aquinas wrote this, quote, "Setting him on His right hand, in Ephesians 1, refers to the second element of Christs exaltation. Considered in relation to God, he is seated at His right hand, but this is not to be thought of as a bodily organ for God is spirit. But as a metaphorical way of speaking, when we say that Christ is seated at the right hand of God, it should be understood that according to his humanity, he partakes of the Father's choices, blessings. And according to his divinity, it is understood as equality with the Father."

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians* no. 60 [trans. F. R. Larcher and M. L. Lamb].

That's Aquinas's commentary on Ephesians, paragraph 60. So Aquinas knows here that in the Old Testament, and even just in the ancient world, if a King's son, for example, sat at his right hand on the throne, it was a sign that he shared fully in the regal royal authority of the king, of his father. When we take that image and apply it to the heavenly Father, Aquinas is saying, it doesn't mean that the heavenly Father has an actual physical right hand because the heavenly Father is pure spirit. He, unlike the second person of the Trinity, did not assume a body, He is pure spirit. But what the image reveals is that Christ, who does have a body and who takes that body into glory, shares fully in the divine regal authority of the heavenly Father. And that as man, he's now partaking of the Father's blessings. In his divinity, he is equal to the Father. This is really crucial. The Ascension of Christ is another aspect of the mystery of his life that reveals the fullness of his divinity, because if He weren't fully God, He would not be able to sit at the right hand of the heavenly Father.

But by being seated in his humanity in the glory of the heavenly places, it reveals, once again, or the mystery of the Ascension reveals, I should say, once again, that Christ is both fully man and fully God, and that as fully man and fully God, he reigns already in heaven from the right hand of the Father, from which he will return to judge the living and the dead. That's what we mean when we make that profession of faith in the creed. He's "seated at the right hand of the Father." From thence he shall come to "judge the living and the dead."