

# Ascension Thursday

The Feast of Jesus' Ascension celebrates the end of Jesus' work on earth for us and his return to God his Father. Luke's Gospel and its sequel - the Acts of the Apostles - describe Jesus as leaving his disciples and rising into heaven. His Ascension is followed almost immediately by the sending of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit Jesus remains present with us as we trust in his promise that he will return at the end of time. Taken together the stories of the Ascension and Pentecost explore the way in which Jesus is now both present to us and distant from us.

The image of Jesus rising through the clouds into heaven is in harmony with the way Luke and his contemporaries saw the world. They imagined our world as like a bowl with a spherical cover. Above the vault were the heavens, the world of God and the spirits. Our image of the world is unimaginably larger, measured in light years. We see rockets go into the sky above us, parachutists come down, and spaceships travel to nearby planets which were once seen as belonging to the heavens. In this world the image of Jesus rising to heaven can seem a little quaint.

We need to attend to the larger reality that underlies the image of Jesus being taken into heaven. It speaks of the journey of the Son of God into the human world, his work for us in Jesus, his killing at the hands of other human beings, his rising from the dead into a new life with God, his opening for us the way to follow him and share in his new life, and his coming again at the end of time. The Ascension is the closing of one stage of God's presence with us and the opening of a new stage of our presence with God.

The Ascension of Jesus is surrounded by rich symbolism that is easy to miss. It is said to take place forty days after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Gospels place his death around the Jewish feast of the Passover which celebrated their freedom from slavery in Egypt. Jesus' death was his passing over from death to life and freeing us from freedom from slavery to sin. The interval between his Resurrection and his Ascension and sending of the Spirit associated these events with another Jewish feast. It celebrated God's giving the Law through Moses to the people in the desert and God's promise to be present to them through the Law and the Temple. This association makes it clear that the Ascension of Jesus is about presence, not absence.

In the story of the Ascension, Jesus instructs his disciples to go to Bethany where he farewells them. In the Gospels Bethany was closely associated with Jesus during his ministry, most notably in John's Gospel as the place where he raised Lazarus to life. It was some distance outside Jerusalem, a safe place to which he retired when under threat of death. In Jerusalem by his death and rising he had conquered death. At his Ascension he could now send the disciples back from Bethany to Jerusalem to share the Good News.