

Celebrating the Ascension¹

Robin Plant

Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek
robin.plant@evtos.hr

Introduction

Christmas. Easter. Pentecost. If you attend any Christian church, you don't need to be told when these events are approaching. We wouldn't let Christmas pass without celebrating the mind-boggling truth of the Word becoming flesh, God with us in Jesus Christ. We wouldn't let Easter pass without meditating on the Cross and rejoicing in Christ's victory over evil. And we wouldn't let Pentecost pass without recalling the day God first poured out his Spirit on all his people, irrespective of age, class or gender.

Nor should we let them pass. Though we know that these truths are always true, and as relevant one day as the next, there is no reason why a pastor should not preach on the incarnation, or a youth group perform a skit about Pentecost in the middle of August. But the chances are they won't. (Incidentally, when did you last hear a sermon on the incarnation?). Given the depressing levels of doctrinal illiteracy in our churches, celebrating and interpreting these great Christian holidays makes good sense. They help us learn, and relearn, the foundational truths of the faith. More than that, the very act of remembering and repeating nurtures the deep qualities of patience, perspective and hope. It is no wonder the Bible sees the ordering of time and the rhythm of seasons as an integral part of God's good creation and an aid to spiritual growth.² The benefits of practising what Robert Webber calls "Christian year spirituality"³ – disciplined, thoughtful, creative use

1 Based on a sermon preached at Orahovica Evangelical Church, 29 May 2011.

2 Genesis 1:14–19; Exodus 12:2; Deuteronomy 15–16; Mark 2:27. For an excellent discussion of "the spirituality of times and seasons" in the Old Testament, relating them both to their Ancient Near Eastern setting and the contemporary world, see Deryck Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord. An Old Testament Spirituality* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996) 327–363.

3 Robert E. Webber, *Ancient–Future Time. Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 22. Webber demonstrates how "personal devotion and corporate spiritual worship may be ordered by the Christian year" (15). For some creative (maybe

of the church calendar – are enormous.

I've said it: "The church calendar". What's that phrase doing in an evangelical journal? And therein lies the problem. The fact is that many Pentecostals, Baptists and other evangelical groups are strangely ambivalent about holy days and seasons. We gladly observe Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (not to do so would suggest we are heretics) ... but that's about all. Unlike our Catholic and Orthodox friends, we do little or nothing to mark the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration, Trinity Sunday, All Saints Day, or Advent. And thereby, I believe, we impoverish ourselves and dilute our worship. Think, just think, of the riches we might be missing. Think of the magnificent truths these days point us to, and how, by celebrating them (sharing meals, giving gifts, blowing trumpets, lighting candles, dancing round the church) and interpreting them (deep, thoughtful, biblical preaching), we might be taking some steps towards true reformation and revival. Thomas Howard makes the point perfectly:

The liturgical year is nothing more (and nothing less) than the Church's 'walking through' the gospel with the Lord. Since it is a plain fact of our humanness that we are rhythmic creatures who must keep coming back to things that are always true, it is especially good for us to do this in the Church ... Somehow the rhythmic, ceremonial return to the ever-present fact helps us. It enriches our apprehension of the thing; whereas, left to our own capacity to keep things alive in our minds, we might find that they have sunk into a kind of autumnal dimness. They need to be revived, not because they dwindle in significance between times, but because we dwindle in our capacity to stay alive to them.⁴

Let me then try to illustrate what "walking through the gospel" might mean by looking at one day in the liturgical year that I haven't yet mentioned – Ascension Day. Sandwiched between Easter and Pentecost, the story of Jesus' bodily return to the Father is often overlooked. Yet Luke records it twice, once briefly (Luke 24:50–51) and then in more detail (Acts 1:1–11). Paul includes it in a summary of core Christian beliefs (1 Timothy 3:16), setting the pattern for subsequent confessions of the church: "I believe in Jesus Christ ... Who rose on the third day and ascended into heaven," says the Apostles' Creed. Imagine, then, an annual service entirely devoted to this theme with creative use of art and technology conveying the truth that Jesus has not only risen, but ascended. Imagine our younger mem-

shocking!) suggestions on how to celebrate Easter and Lent, see N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007) 267–269.

4 Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough. Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984) 133 (italics his). In his chapter, "The Liturgical Year: Redeeming the Time" (pages 131–148), the author – who is from a solidly evangelical background – records his delight in discovering the meaning of the church's holidays.

bers asking, as Jewish children ask their parents every year at Passover, “What do you mean by this service?” (Exodus 12:26).⁵ What will we tell them?

It is Jesus who Reigns

“He was lifted up” (Acts 1:9). That is how Luke describes Jesus’ return to heaven, and there is no reason to doubt that his words reflect what the disciples saw; that’s why they are left gazing up into the sky (vs. 10-11). We might feel rather embarrassed at this apparently naïve, pre-scientific view of the cosmos (one thinks of Yuri Gagarin’s alleged comment, after making the first human flight into space: “I looked and I looked but I didn’t see God”). But Luke is not implying that heaven is somewhere you can reach if you fly high enough. Rather, as Jim Packer puts it, “What happened at the Ascension ... was not that Jesus became a spaceman but that his disciples were shown a sign”.⁶ Jesus could have returned to the Father by vanishing into thin air, or he could have walked out onto the Sea of Galilee and never come back. But neither action would have communicated to the insecure, confused disciples what God wanted to communicate to them: that the Jesus they had known, who had grown up in Nazareth, walked the streets of Judah, eaten with the outcasts, healed the sick, and who had been stripped and nailed to a cross – this same Jesus had now been raised to the supreme place of authority and honour.

Luke underlines this point a few chapters later. As Stephen is finishing his hard-hitting message to the Sanhedrin, and moments before he is stoned to death, we read that “He gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ ” (Acts 7:55–56). “The Son of Man” – no title could more clearly point back to the historical, flesh-and-blood Jesus than that. But equally, no expression could show more clearly the supreme honour he now holds than “At the right hand of God”.

In other words, not only is Jesus Lord, but (in answer to a different question) the Lord is Jesus. He is not an elected president, not a bully dictator, not the majority, not the individual, not the free market, not the power of love, not the forces of history, but Jesus of Nazareth. “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 the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21) is as unambiguous as it gets. However chaotic and evil our world may be, it is not beyond Christ’s re-creating power; and howe-

5 All biblical quotations in this article are from the English Standard Version.

6 J. I. Packer, *The Apostles’ Creed* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1977) 61 (italics his).

ver attractive and sophisticated it may seem, it is not beyond his unerring judgment. That is part of the message of Ascension Day. We know it, but constantly need to relearn it.

But there is something else which may be less obvious. Paradoxically, to say that Jesus has returned to the Father does not mean that he has withdrawn from the world. It is precisely the opposite. “He who descended”, Paul writes, “is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (Ephesians 4:10). Through his ascension, Jesus became not less involved, but more involved with the world he created. If that sounds strange, think of the Gospels. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus worked in one place at one time. He crossed the lake to free a demon possessed man (Mark 5:1–20), crossed back to heal a sick woman and raise a dead girl (Mark 5:21–43), and returned to his home town to preach in the synagogue (Mark 6:1–5) before setting off again through the villages (Mark 6:6). Wherever he went, there his power was felt; but it was not felt in Rome, or Athens, or Cairo. With the ascension, that changed. From that point on, Jesus fills the universe, and the mission of which his earthly ministry had been a microcosm became truly global. Even as you read this, in homes, schools, hospitals and prison cells around the world, Jesus is healing the sick, giving hope and strength to those in despair, and opening the eyes of those who do not know him. This Sunday, he will meet with his people in churches from Adelaide to Zagreb. Heaven is not a distant country; rather, as N. T. Wright explains, “Heaven relates to earth tangentially, so that the one who is in heaven can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth; the ascension therefore means that Jesus is available, accessible, without people having to travel to a particular spot on earth to find him”.⁷

This, of course, is the basis for courageous, hope-filled prayer and mission.⁸ Fans of the cult TV series *Star Trek* will remember how Captain Kirk and his men would often teleport down to an unknown planet only to get caught up in some conflict or crisis. As a last resort, however, they could always ask their colleagues on the *Star Ship Enterprise* to teleport them back to safety with the memorable words, “Beam us up, Scotty!” Evangelicals are prone to think of the ascension in those terms. Our Lord has gone before us to the safety and comfort of heaven, and as the days get darker, we’re waiting for him to beam us up there too. But as we’ve seen, the reason why Jesus has returned to the Father is to fill his world with the glory of God, not to abandon it to its fate. And so it makes sense to pray for Christians overseas and start Bible study groups in universities. The ascended Jesus fills those places. For the same reason, it makes sense for his disciples to

7 Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 122.

8 See Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 120–128.

work in science, the arts, and politics. A few years ago, the Christian film director Norman Stone was giving the graduation address to some theological students in Glasgow. Drawing on his own experience, he challenged them to go into similar 'secular' work situations, expecting that when they arrived, they would find that Jesus was already present and at work there. He fills those places, too.

It is the Crucified Jesus who Reigns

The Gospels show clearly that when Jesus was raised, it was to a new quality of life, with a glorified body unrestricted by time and space (Luke 24:31, 36; John 20:26; 1 Corinthians 15:42–43; Philippians 3:21).⁹ Yet, it was still Jesus; the way he spoke, the way he broke bread, and the scars on his body left no room for doubt. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he ascended still carrying the marks of his suffering and crucifixion.

It is, of course, for this reason that the writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus as our great High Priest. We often speak of "the finished work of Christ", and, in one sense, rightly; his death on the cross was a sacrifice sufficient and valid for all time (Hebrews 7:27; 9:24–28; 10:12). His priestly, representative work, however, is not finished, which is just as well for us. Permanently weak, guilty Christians need a permanent mediator, and that is what we have; Jesus "always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25; notice the present tense). As Webber puts it, "Jesus ascends in order to continue his work as our eternal intercessor".¹⁰ To spell this out and drive it home may be the best pastoral care you can give to your church.

The fact that it is the crucified Jesus who reigns is important for another reason. For many people outside the church – and some within it – the Christian claim that "Jesus is Lord" is deeply disturbing, even offensive. This is not (necessarily) because such people are proud or promiscuous, and want to throw off all moral restraints. It is quite the reverse. They know all too well the corruption and tyranny to which "Lordship" invariably leads. Putting power in the hands of any individual is dangerous; but if that power is universal power, then what Christians call "the good news" is in fact the ultimate nightmare. At least earthly dictators die eventually; not so the cosmic dictator, Jesus.

This is, I repeat, an objection that Christians must take seriously and sensitively. We all know how easily authority leads to abuse (not least in the church).

9 "Christ's resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse but the transformation of his physical body into a 'glorified body' ... adapted to his present heavenly existence" – Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 777.

10 Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 159.

ch, including its evangelical wing). The solution, however, is not the abolition of power, but a different kind of power. And that is exactly what the New Testament offers us. In Revelation 4–5, John describes his vision of heaven. It is, as we would expect, a scene of overwhelming, majestic power, an impression reinforced by quintessential monarchical concepts (glory, honour, strength) and images (a throne, crowns, and servants falling down in worship). What we do not expect is what John sees at the centre: “And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (5:6). There is the ascended Jesus, bearing the scars of his crucifixion. The one who rules all things knows for himself how ugly and destructive earthly power can be, but through his life, death and resurrection, he offers us a new, self-giving model of kingship. As Lesslie Newbigin remarks, “The very heart of the biblical vision for the unity of humankind is that its centre is not an imperial power but the slain lamb”.¹¹

11 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989) 159.