

Church of St John the Evangelist, Elora
Sunday after Ascension
May 29, 2022
Canon Paul Walker

We are situated in that unique moment in the Christian calendar between the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost. It is a strange period of ten days when we acknowledge that Jesus has ascended back to the heavenly Father, from where he first came. The arc of the incarnation has now been completed. Jesus came *down* from heaven, and descended into the depths of hell, and now is ascending back to heaven. As he disappears from the earth Jesus instructs the apostles to go to Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that will remind them of all the things he said, empower them to be witnesses to the resurrection, and be their comfort.

But, the Holy Spirit has not yet descended upon them. So in this time of Jesus' earthly absence and the waiting for an unknown period of time for the Spirit to arrive, the Collect for today addresses our condition of chronic anxiety. It appropriately asks that God not leave us comfortless; that we not be abandoned; that Jesus still abides with us.

It is an appropriate prayer at any time, particularly when in a crisis, because in a time of crisis it is so easy to think that you have been abandoned. The most common and recurring question that I face in conversation with people is “where is God?” Apparently, in heaven.

The ascension is a curious and important event. Unlike other events referenced in the creeds, like Jesus' birth or death, I don't know many people who have witnessed someone ascending into the heavenly realms. So it all seems a bit peculiar.

But if Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, and if he appeared in a *bodily* form for 40 days to hundreds of people throughout Galilee and Judea with many convincing proofs, then there had to be some way of reuniting him with the heavenly Father. What I find extraordinary is that his bodily, earthly, fleshly form *ascended* into the heavens. This is telling us something important.

Just as God descended from the heavens, became incarnate, and took on human flesh to show us a glimpse of heaven on earth; so now

in the ascension, God takes the human, earthly form *into* heaven. A bit of earth is taken up into heaven and becomes one with the Creator. It is an extraordinary act that seems to dissolve any separation between heavenly and earthly; sacred and secular, righteous and unrighteous. This is truly the completion of the work of the incarnation of bringing God the creator down into the creation, and also now bringing the creation into the presence of God. They are one; never again to be separated or abandoned.

Do you remember the story of Jacob on the run from his brother, Esau? Out of exhaustion Jacob collapses in the wilderness and falls asleep. There, Jacob has a dream in the wilderness where he sees the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder as though heaven and earth are connected. Jacob awoke from that dream and said, “truly God was in this place.” Centuries later, Philip and Nathaniel saw Jesus for the first time, and recognize him as the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world, and then Jesus informs them that they would see greater things than this. They would see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of

God. In other words they would see that Jesus would become the ladder, just like in Jacob’s dream, to connect heaven and earth. So, it is entirely appropriate that Jesus, the one that came down from heaven, takes the creation in a bodily form back with him into heaven to reside in the bosom of God for all time.

Far from diminishing the body as mere flesh; as something earthly; or as something unholy; the ascension of Jesus in bodily form, as peculiar as it may seem to our sensitivity, affirms the body, the flesh, and creation as something to be treated with utmost dignity and sacredness. As our indigenous sisters and brothers have been saying for centuries, the Creator and the creation are *one*. So Jesus says, “when you see one of the least of these, you see me.” As we live between the Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost may we treat all of creation, including our bodies, with reverence and holiness as though we were encountering heaven on earth.

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