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In Jesus, the Future Has Already Begun!

Biblical Reflection for Solemnity of the Ascension C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MAY 11, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Just as Jerusalem was the city of destiny in the Gospel of Luke (the place where salvation was accomplished), so here at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Jerusalem occupies a central position. It is the starting point for the mission of the Christian disciples to "the ends of the earth," the place where the apostles were situated and the doctrinal focal point in the early days of the community (Acts 15:2, 6).

The first verses of today's first reading (Acts 1:1-2) connect the book of Acts with the Gospel of Luke, and show that the apostles were instructed by the risen Jesus (vv 3-5). The disciples were anxious for answers. They asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They thought "the promise of the Father" would bring about an age of political sovereignty such as the nation had enjoyed under the reign of King David. But Jesus' answer made clear that this is not what the promise is all about. Neither would the promise give them a glimpse of the end times, for "it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set" for the end of time. The promise was not going to make their lives easier by restoring political or national dominance or by granting divine insight. When they received the Spirit they too would be baptized in fire. They would be empowered to take on the role of Christ: to teach and to nourish and to serve, to be ignored, to suffer and to die for him.

After speaking, Jesus was lifted up into the heavens before his friends. Just imagine this awesome scene! How does it feel to them to watch their Lord and Master leave? The angels' words to the "men of Galilee" are painfully blunt and leave little room for misinterpretation: "Why do you stand here looking up at the skies? This Jesus who has been taken from you will return, just as you saw him go up to the heavens."

The disciples are given a last bit of instruction: "Don't keep trying to stare into the future. Don't be overly concerned about which hour he will come back." We must not stand idly staring up into the heavens and moaning about the past, about which we can do nothing, except to bury it deeply in God's hands and heart! The Lord will be glorified, and it follows that his disciples will also share in his glory. Let's get going and carry a piece of heaven into the world. This is the meaning of the Resurrection and the Ascension of our Lord, not one of divine abandonment of the human cause, but divine empowerment of the Gospel dream!

Beginning From Jerusalem

The resurrection appearances in Luke's Gospel take place in and around Jerusalem. Luke brings his Gospel story about the time of Jesus to a close (vv 50-53) with the report of the ascension. The Gospel ends as it began (1:9), in the Jerusalem temple (v 53). Luke will also begin the story of the time of the church with a recounting of the ascension. In Luke's Resurrection chapter, the evangelist recounts the ascension of Jesus on Easter Sunday night, thereby closely associating it with the resurrection.

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As I have pointed out in previous Easter reflections, Chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel can be divided into four major sections: a) the story of the women at the tomb, which ends with Peter's visit to the tomb to check it (vv 1-12); b) the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, which culminates in their learning that the Lord had also appeared to Peter (vv 13-35); c) the appearance of the Lord to his disciples at a meal, which culminates with their commissioning by Jesus (vv 36-49); and d) Jesus' ascension into heaven (vv 50-52).

What should probably be understood as one event (resurrection, glorification, ascension, sending of the Spirit -- the paschal mystery) has been historicized by Luke when he writes of a visible ascension of Jesus after 40 days and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. For Luke, the ascension marks the end of the appearances of Jesus except for the extraordinary appearance to Paul. With regard to Luke's understanding of salvation history, the ascension also marks the end of the time of Jesus (Luke 24:50-53) and signals the beginning of the time of the Church.

Conformity to the Jewish Scriptures

The final scene of Luke's Gospel emphasizes that what is written in the Jewish Scriptures must of necessity be fulfilled because it reveals the plan of God which cannot fail to be accomplished. The life, death and resurrection of Christ are fully in accord with the Scriptures. The clearest expression of this is found in the words addressed by the risen Christ to his disciples: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you -- that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44). This statement shows the basis of the necessity for the paschal mystery of Jesus, affirmed in numerous passages in the Gospels: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering ... and after three days rise again"; "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled which say it must happen this way?" (Matthew 26:54); "This Scripture must be fulfilled in me" (Luke 22:37).

Present in a thousand places

On the day of his Ascension, one might conclude that Jesus removed himself into a new form of divine exclusion. The case is exactly the opposite. In God, Jesus is "here" in a new and very specific way. Only in his physical separation from the historical scene can his spiritual union with the entire world for all time be complete.

In his "ascension" Jesus made a commitment to the earth that we live in. His footprints are not etched for tourists to view in the stone beneath us. But they are visible in the hearts of those who follow him. As he gave up the ability to be present in one place, he gained the capability of being present in a thousand places. When Jesus vanished, he filled the earth with the presence of God. God's presence is still here and is available for us as the ultimate fulfillment of all our dreams. We know that we move toward heaven to the extent that we approach Jesus. We are assured that he hasn't ever stopped being present with us throughout all time. And through us he wants to become even more present, especially as his Church.

Profound lesson

The Ascension of Our Lord teaches us a profound lesson about possessing and being possessed. Through his ascension, Jesus shows that clinging to him in time and history serves no purpose. Nor does he cling to the human beings around him, unwilling to let them go free in order to continue their Gospel mission. Rather, his whole life, death and resurrection teach us to accept everyone and everything as a gift, on loan to us.

It is not good to cling tightly to relationships or to hoard earthly treasures. Today let us learn to revere all that we have with deep gratitude, and hold everything in open hands. During our times of prayer, let us open our hands and surrender all the important treasures and relationships of our lives to God. Let us be aware of our feelings toward others, and toward the things we have. Let us spend time expressing our gratitude to God for

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each gift and relationship. And most important of all, let us find some concrete ways to express our love and gratitude to people we often take for granted, including Jesus.

Just as the Risen Lord entrusted himself into the hands of such pathetic, broken people, he does the same to us. The full significance of the Ascension reminds us that Christ accepts our lack of self-confidence in ourselves. He accepts the shadowy and dark areas of our humanity. He accepts our capacity for deceit, betrayal, greed and power. And having accepted us, he calls us, gives us the eternal commission to be his people, and sends us to serve him and love him, in spite of ourselves and because of ourselves.

On the day of his Ascension, one might conclude that Jesus removed himself into a new form of divine exclusion. The case is exactly the opposite. In God, Jesus is "here" in a new and very specific way. Only in his physical separation from the historical scene can his spiritual union with the entire world for all time be complete. Jesus left the world one day in order to be available to all people throughout all time. He had to dissolve bonds he had made with his friends, in order to be available for everybody. In Jesus, the future has already begun!

"He whom you love is no longer where he was before. He is now wherever you are" (St. John Chrysostom).

[The readings for the Ascension of the Lord are Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23 or Hebrews 9:24-28; Luke 24:46-53]

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On the Net:

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Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord -- "Desire for Heavenly Realities":
www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFbcUErz5ec

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