

Sunday, 8 May 2016

Why did Jesus leave? Ascension



Acts 1:1-11

For a long time I had many mixed feelings about Jesus' Ascension. I never quite understood why Jesus left. It was as if he was "beamed up" to the Starship Enterprise boldly going somewhere else and leaving us all down here to deal with our problems on our own. I wondered if the Apostles felt the same way.

It was pretty obvious that they still needed Jesus' help. In our reading from the Acts, the disciples ask Jesus a question- "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" John Calvin commented on the Apostles' question and stated

that there are almost as many errors in that question as there are words. Keep in mind that Jesus has been teaching them for forty days after the resurrection, and that is on top of the three years they spent together. They were still stuck in that old way of thinking about the messiah as a warrior king that was going to save the nation of Israel from the bad Pagans. Jesus would lead his army to kick out the Romans, take over the government, and create an ideal peaceful kingdom for the Jewish people. ... They still didn't get it. This was going to grow slow, and it was for the entire world, not just Israel.

It makes me wonder how Jesus could leave after they asked a question like that. It would be like leaving a teenager in charge of the house when you go on a trip. You put emergency numbers on the fridge, you fill the pantry with food, and just before you walk out the door to catch a plane your teenager asks you "You don't mind if I have a party while you're gone do you?" I'm sure most of us would cancel the trip convinced they aren't ready for the responsibility.

But, Jesus goes. The disciples come and ask him this question, but they should know better. The question shows their ignorance. I want to yell out to Jesus at that point and tell him not to leave them at such an important time. They need more help. They need more training.

Sometimes I feel the same way when I look at our world. He's left, but we need help. We have forest fires raging out of control leaving almost 100,000 people homeless. We are killing off

animal species on this planet at an alarming rate. In our desire for the cheapest stuff we support sweat shops that are essentially run by modern-day slaves. We continue to eat too much and waste food and resources, while many people in our world are starving. At times I can feel pretty overwhelmed with the mess the world seems to be in.

Sadly, sometimes the church is a mess too. Don't get me wrong, the church is doing some beautiful things, but there is a lot of mess in the church too. We're confused over moral matters. We argue over all kinds of things- music, sexuality, worship style- and that's just worship. Throw in dinners, garage sales, renovations, and various ministries and it can be opportunity for all kinds of mess that we want to hide under a bushel so the world doesn't see it. There are politics and power games, and you name it.... Dorothy Day once said, "As to the Church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ, one flesh with Christ? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother." ... Sometimes we are not the light to the world Jesus called us to be.

It's easy to come down on governments and factory owners and institutions like the church, but then we look into our own lives and we aren't always all that much better. Very few of us really live up to our own standards of what it means to live a really good life, unless our standards are very very low. ... Surely we are just as ignorant as the disciples who asked the question that exposed their ignorance. ... But he left. He left us in this mess. Surely he must know that we need him with us- so why would he leave?

I eventually found out that I had misunderstood the Ascension. It wasn't about Jesus getting beamed up into a spaceship to boldly go where no messiah has gone before. It was not about abandoning us at all. ... It was about getting closer to us.

By Ascending, Jesus was enveloped in the cloud of the Glory of God. When Jesus ascended, in modern language we might say that he went into another dimension- The dimension of heaven. He entered as a full human being into the dimension of heaven. There he realized his full glory. ... But, this ascending isn't about leaving us. The dimension of heaven isn't on some far distant planet, it is a dimension that overlaps with our own.

The Ascension is an enthronement. It is when Jesus entered his full Lordship. It is also when he took on his full Transcendence. Transcendence is a word that is used to talk about how "other" God is. God is the creator of the universe and so is beyond the physical universe. God is beyond any of our imaginings about Him. He is beyond our words about him, because He is unlike anything else. ... If you want to understand Transcendence, contemplate the seeming infinitude of space- The billions of Galaxies- and then think about the being that began it all. Or think about a being that can create time, or laws of physics (like gravity). ... The image of God as the man in the clouds with a long white beard is ridiculous when compared to a being like that.

God's transcendence can sometimes (mistakenly) make us feel as if He is not close to us. We can feel like he is so powerful and different from us that we have no way of bridging that

difference. This is a mistake because His transcendence is necessary for his immanence. Immanence means that God is close to us. God is intimately near us. As St. Augustine said, “God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves”. God is so close to us he hears the beating of our heart- the blood flowing through our veins- He hears every secret whispered thought in our minds.

It seems paradoxical, but God’s transcendence is necessary for His immanence. If Jesus were to stay with us as his resurrected self without ascending he could only be in one place at a time. If he has a human body and lives in this earthly reality, then he can only be in one place at a time. That means that if he was in a locked room with his apostles, he could not at the same time be with us here. In ascending into the dimension of heaven (where he is not limited by space or time), Jesus gains the ability to be with us always and everywhere to the very end of the age. He gains the ability to work simultaneously through Mother Theresa in Calcutta, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany. He has the ability to be simultaneously present in our Eucharistic meal, and also at the numerous other meals of Holy Communion throughout this province and throughout the world. And in a thousands upon thousands of other ways he is working to transform us and our world. That immanent presence and power of Jesus with us after his Ascension is what we call the Holy Spirit.

Think of it a bit like this. I speak and my voice is limited by my volume, other competing sounds, the acoustics of the building, etc. However, if I use my cell phone, it can change my voice into an invisible reality that can then be heard and received all

over the world (depending on the number I call). But for that to happen my voice has to be transformed into radio waves that we can neither hear nor see without having another cell phone to receive the signal. My voice has to ascend into a different way of being before my wife can then receive my call and hear her telling her that I love her. ... Jesus had to ascend in order to be able to be with us. ... Though, it is a different way of being with us. This was the gift of the Holy Spirit they were to wait for in Jerusalem.

The way Jesus is with us now is through the Holy Spirit. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost is how Jesus intimately indwelt his followers. The Holy Spirit's presence with the disciples is Jesus' presence with the disciples. ... Before Jesus taught them from the outside, but now (through the Holy Spirit) Jesus can teach them from the inside.

With the Holy Spirit they receive power. This power will enable them to live and teach what Jesus taught. They will act and speak in Jerusalem, but they won't be limited by the geography or politics of the nation of Israel. Eventually this teaching will spread to the ends of the earth by the Holy Spirit working through his disciples- generation after generation. This is a mission we have inherited. The Holy Spirit working through Christians has brought us this message, and is now empowering us to deliver it into the world, just as the Holy Spirit has done for 2000 years.

The Book of Acts is sometimes called the "Acts of the Apostles", but that can be a little misleading. Others have offered to call it the "Acts of the Holy Spirit", this can be

equally misleading. The preacher John Stott suggests the lengthy title “The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles”. It is a bit wordy, but it is accurate. I think it would be helpful for us to think of ourselves this way as the church. The church is continuously speaking the words and deeds of Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus entered as a human being into Heaven, but he has not left us. His presence is different, but he has not left us. The Ascension is about him getting closer to us, not further away. Because of his ascension He hears every quiver of pain in our heart. And he stands as a fellow human being holding our pain and sorrow before God’s open heart. He also pours out on us his healing and power through His Holy Spirit to do his work here.