

The Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Saint Mark's, Tampa

16 May 2010

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Those of you who have really long memories may recall something called "Ascensiontide." Forty days after Easter, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Ascension. It used to be that the period from Ascension Day until Pentecost was called "Ascensiontide." The Paschal Candle would be extinguished on Ascension Day and then taken out of the church, and there was a sense that the period between Christ's Ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost had a distinctive character all its own. More recent liturgical thought has recovered the idea that the Easter season is fifty days, not forty – it lasts all the way to Pentecost – and we keep the Paschal candle lit accordingly. And so the idea of Ascensiontide as a season unto itself has mostly been abandoned.

Which is a shame, really, because today's readings are very Ascensiontide-ish, and we need to shift our thinking from Easter to Ascension if we're to have any hope of making sense of what's going on today. The Feast of the Ascension emphasizes three things:

the continuing humanity of Christ,
the kingship of Christ, and
the priestly character of Christ.

I spoke about the first of these, the continuing humanity of Christ, at our Ascension celebration this past Wednesday. One of the great truths of the Ascension is that Christ does not shed his human nature when he returns to the Father. Christ did not put on humanity like a spacesuit – just long enough to mingle with human beings as though we were alien life forms – and then shed it as an astronaut sheds his spacesuit when he returns to his familiar atmosphere. No, when God does a thing, he goes all out; our human nature is permanently united with God in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man, and the one who is seated on the throne has a human nature like ours, wounded, as ours is wounded, and blessed, as ours will some day be blessed.

The theme of the continuing humanity of Christ leads directly to theme of his kingship. Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians that by “seat[ing] Christ at his right hand in the heavenly places” God has placed him “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 age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things.” Long before there was ever any Feast of Christ the King – a *very* recent innovation imposed upon us by a 20th-century pope – the ancient and proper celebration of the kingship of Christ was Ascension Day. This is the day on which he takes his place at the Father’s right hand, the crown of thorns transfigured into a crown of glory. And because of Christ’s continuing humanity, his kingship is our kingship:

Thou hast raised our human nature on the clouds to God’s right hand:
there we sit in heavenly places, there with thee in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne;
mighty Lord, in thine ascension, we by faith behold our own.

In addition to the emphasis on the continuing humanity of Christ and on his kingship, there is a third theme: that of Christ as high priest. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that because Christ is always present at God’s right hand, Jesus “is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” He is a priest because he offers sacrifice: the perfect sacrifice of obedience, made once for all. But he is also a priest because he prays.

Today’s Gospel focuses particularly on this aspect of Christ as high priest. But where the writer to the Hebrews simply assures us that Christ intercedes for us, John the Evangelist actually gives us the privilege of overhearing that prayer.

It is the night of the Last Supper, the eve of his death, and Jesus prays. And that’s the first thing to notice about this morning’s Gospel. Jesus is not speaking to his disciples. He is speaking to his Father, and letting the disciples overhear something of that never-ending exchange of love that is the life of the Trinity. And we get the privilege of knowing what is in Jesus’ heart at this crucial moment, when the meal is shared and the sacrifice is made ready and the act of perfect obedience is being brought to fulfillment.

And what is on Jesus’ heart is *us*. Having prayed for the eleven who are at table with him, Jesus then prays for *us*: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.”

And what does he ask on our behalf? He asks three things: that we will be one, that we will be with him where he is, and that we will see his glory.

First, he prays that we will be one. He says, “I ask . . . on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” So that means he’s laying on us a command and a responsibility to work for the unity of the Church, right? Well, lots of people have read it that way, but that reading simply fails to take account of what is going on here. Jesus is not issuing marching orders to his disciples or to us – he’s not even talking to his disciples or to us. He is talking to the Father. He is entrusting the unity of the Church to the Father.

In the next words of the prayer, we find out what the nature of that unity is: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” This is not a unity that can be achieved by human efforts, by ecumenical discussions and joint mission projects and actions of the General Convention. If *only!* We like the idea of that kind of unity, because it gives us something to do; and as much as we all profess our need for God’s grace, deep down we quite often think that we can make it all better if we just work hard enough. But the unity that Jesus desires for us – this unity that is on his heart at this most crucial moment – is a unity that comes from a personal union with God that is so deep and so intimate that it is like the unity of the Son with the Father: “as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” We are one with each other in and through our union with God, through “our incorporation into the true Vine as branches in which the divine life is flowing.” This is not something for us to do – it is something for us to *be*. It is not a task to perform – it is an invitation to accept.

He prays that we will be one – and then he prays that we will be with him where he is: “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am.” This is what we ask in one of the Ascension Day collects: “Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell.” These two prayers – that we will be one, and that we will be with him – are really one and the same. As Archbishop Temple wrote, Christ’s “Ascension means that He is perfectly united with God; we are with Him wherever we are present to God; and that is everywhere and always. Because he is ‘in Heaven,’ He is everywhere on earth: because He is ascended, He is here now.”

He prays that we will be one, that we will be with him where he is – and, third, he prays that we will see his glory: “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given

me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” But he does not merely ask for us to see his glory. He says that he has already given us his glory: “The glory that you have given me, I have given them.”

And we’re tempted to look around and say – “*this* is glory?”

Yes: this is glory. As we gather at the Lord’s table, as the meal is shared and the sacrifice is made ready and the act of perfect obedience is re-presented, we in heart and mind ascend into heaven, where a human being, like us in every way – sin only excepted – eternally offers himself for us to the Father, eternally intercedes for us, asking that we will be one, that we will be with him where he is, that we will see his glory.

Our unity, our presence with him, our vision of his glory, indeed our own glory: these are all both current realities and future promise. The exaltation of perfect humanity to the Father’s right hand is Christ’s in reality, the glory of being made one with Christ is ours by baptism, and the divine life that flows in us as branches of the vine is refreshed week after week at the Lord’s table. And yet we know that we are not yet where Christ is, not yet so much one with God that our union with the Lord is like the Son’s union with the Father. In Ascensiontide we are, in the words of an old Amy Grant song, caught in between the now and the not yet.

That’s OK. A mere triviality like the gulf between the now and the not yet, between present hope and future fulfillment, is nothing to the one who is at once the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. So we reach out from the glory that is ours to the glory that is yet to come – from human nature redeemed but still struggling to human nature in its exaltation at the right hand of the Father – and ask that by taking into ourselves the body and the blood of the one who died to redeem us, we may become what we already are.

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”
And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!