

This morning, I would like to contemplate the Ascension of Christ through the lens provided us by one of the great Ascension Day hymns. Perhaps next year we will learn this hymn. It is found at number 151 in our hymnal.

Verse 1:

See the Conqueror mounts in triumph; see the King in royal state,  
riding on the clouds, his chariot, to his heavenly palace gate!  
Hark! the choirs of angel voices joyful alleluias sing,  
and the portals high are lifted to receive their heavenly King.

This verse imagines for us the heavenly scene of Christ approaching the throne room of God. Our reading this morning from Daniel 7 is one of the primary biblical texts which is the basis for this imagery. What imagery? That of the majestic and victorious Christ entering into the heavenly realm to the roaring acclamation of all the heavenly hosts, the gates flinging open before Him as He approaches His throne to rule heaven and earth, and to rule the place of the rebellious spirits, both human and demonic, referred to as “things under the earth.”

Note here the mention of clouds. We might associate the mention of clouds in scripture with the white, puffy clouds we experience on a beautiful sunny day. However, this image misses the scriptural point. We need to think of dark and foreboding storm clouds with howling winds. We should envision lightnings and thunderings. These clouds are nothing less than the shekinah glory clouds of God. They represent the presence of God, and induce fear and awe.

Think, for example, of the Transfiguration – all three synoptic gospels record that the disciples were afraid when the cloud surrounded them. Think of God giving Moses the Law on Mount Sinai. The people were afraid to approach the mountain because of the raging storm cloud that covered it. There were flashes of lightning and earth-rending peals of thunder that terrified the people of Israel. God’s presence brings fear for it reveals divine holiness to us, and it reveals how far short of this holiness we fall. God is a consuming fire. No one without the seal of the spirit of God in their lives can withstand the judgment of the Presence of God.

When we use incense in our worship, this is the imagery to think of. The cloud of incense reminds us of the shekinah glory cloud of God. In our worship we enter into the throne room of Christ. We are in Christ Jesus, and have passed from condemnation to welcome; and what causes fear for those outside of Christ’s family, bring beauty and peace to those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Continuing on with the hymn, verse 2 reads:

He who on the cross did suffer, he who from the grave arose,  
he has vanquished sin and Satan; he by death has spoiled his foes.  
While he lifts his hands in blessing, he is parted from his friends;  
while their eager eyes behold him, he upon the clouds ascends.

The emphasis in this verse is the victory of Christ over death, sin, and the spiritual beings aligned against God. It is reminiscent of John Chrysostom's Easter homily:

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!  
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!  
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!  
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Now, in the Ascension, the victorious Christ, man and God, enters into the presence of the Father, taking up the throne to rule, for He is the only One who is worthy to rule. His throne was not just inherited. It was won. The throne goes to the victor.

In this verse of the hymn we see also a reference to the Ascension Day gospel reading from St. Luke 24, where it says "he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven." Both in the hymn and in the epistle for Ascension Day, we see again the reference to Christ being taken into a cloud. We might think of Christ going up into space, but we should rather think of this as Christ moving from our physical space to a parallel spiritual dimension or plane. The heavenly realm overlaps our physical realm. Sometimes in our experience, we apprehend that dimension where God the Father exists and from where Christ reigns. This realm of Christ's presence is especially manifest when we gather together for worship, when we gather to commune with the reigning Christ.

Now we come to verse 3 of the hymn. It is interesting that this verse is not included in most hymnals that include this hymn. Particularly even the 1940 hymnal excludes it. It is, however, one of the original 8 verses published by the author, Christopher Wordsworth, who would become bishop of Lincoln, in his 1862 book of hymns for the Christian year. The verse reads:

Now our heav'nly Aaron enters, With his blood, within the veil;  
Joshua is come to Canaan, And the kings before him quail;  
Now he plants the tribes of Israel In their promised resting place;  
Now our great Elijah offers Double portion of his grace.

The verse poetically expresses significant theological truth. Aaron, of course, was the brother of Moses and the first high priest of the Old Testament Hebrews. Aaron's priesthood, along with all human priests, points us to our ultimate great high priest, Jesus Christ. The first line of this verse then points us to Hebrews chapter 9 where Christ, as the great high priest, presents the blood of His once for all sacrifice to the Father, entering thereby into the presence of God the Father. Christ is the tabernacle not made by hands, but is Himself the perfect union of God and Man, and therefore brings perfected humanity into the presence of God, into the true Holy of Holies.

As our Great High Priest, Jesus makes intercessions for us. He is aware of us and concerned about us, and so He authoritatively brings petitions before God the Father. Bishop Wordsworth, in another verse that is excluded from basically all hymnals, puts it this way, "See Him, who is ever pleading for us with prevailing prayer."

This concept is based upon Romans 8:34, "Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes **intercession** for us." Similarly Hebrews 7:25 mentions that Christ, continually makes intercessions for us. Christ, as our High Priest and King, is intimately involved in our lives. Christ cares for you. Jesus loves you. He knows your struggles. He sees you and will bring you through all the struggles of this life. This is the foundation for our confident belief. This is the basis for stepping out in faith to accomplish great things. This is a direct result of the Ascension.

Jesus enters into the presence of God, by presenting Himself as our perfect sacrifice. Therefore, Jesus Christ is our true savior. His name, Jesus, or Yeshua in the Hebrew is the same name as Joshua. The literal meaning of these names is Savior, and as Joshua led the Hebrew triumphantly to conquer the promised land, expelling the pagan kings, so Our Savior Jesus, is conquering every enemy that sets itself up against the Kingdom of God. We, the continuing people of God in this world, will ultimately be established in the New Creation, the final promised land, where the futility and vanity and pride of this life will pass away. And as Elijah passed on to Elisha, a double portion of the grace given him, so too, we will be filled to overflowing with the unbounded grace of Christ.

Finally, the words of verse 4 of this hymn are:

Thou has 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.

This verse contains a key concept in understanding the Ascension of Christ. Because Christ is God and Man, two natures perfectly united into one person, He represents humanity, perfected, individualized, and corporate. He represents each one of us so His Death is our death, His Resurrection is our resurrection, and His Ascension is our ascension. Because Christ exists in presence of the Father in the heavenly tabernacle, upon the heavenly throne, because He is in perfect union with the Father, then we too exist in perfect union with the Father. In Christ, we are joined to the Father, and we reign with Christ from the throne. To Christ belongs the ultimate dominion, but we too are given dominion as well. We are, in an objective sense, who Christ is. Man with God is on the throne. In Christ's Ascension, we behold our own.

And yet, it is very easy to look at the world today and to become discouraged. It surely doesn't look like Christ is reigning. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters have a defeatist mindset. They look at the world as their source of truth instead of looking to the salvation of Christ revealed to us through the Word of God. They have personalized Christ's work to the point that they don't have a larger vision of Christ's redemption for all of Creation. If we don't believe that the extent of Christ's salvation is as great or greater than the extent of the effects of sin, then we have an anemic view of God. If we don't believe that Christ reigns, then we surely will not act in the power of the resurrection life. We surely will be a defeated and cowardly people.

But this is not the message of Bishop Wordsworth's hymn. This is not the message of the Ascension. In that the larger Christian population in this country is oblivious to the meaning of Christ's Ascension, it is no wonder that the American church is capitulating to popular culture, instead of transforming popular culture. It is no wonder that we are impotent. We are not impacting the world like we should. We no longer resemble the Church that conquered the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the faith. Instead, we are a Church cowering in fear in the upper room. We are safe, but ineffective.

It is time for the Church to reclaim the biblical fact that Jesus reigns, that Christ is King – not just in the future, but now. This is what the Feast of the Ascension is all about.

Let us therefore not just celebrate the Feast of Ascension as another one of those days on the calendar. Let us embrace this feast with all enthusiasm. Let our lives be characterized by a true confidence that Christ is King, and the King loves us with an eternal love. And with that same confidence, let us first enter into the throne room of the King. Let us feast at His table. Let us celebrate with hearty love and thanksgiving, the salvation won for us by our Lord Je-

2024-05-12

Sunday after Ascension

K. Bartel, 5

us Christ so that our spirits would be strengthened to live as we ought to live and to do all we are called to do.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.