

*See! he lifts his hands above;
See! he shows the prints of love:
Hark! his gracious lips bestow,
Blessings on his Church below.*

from Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise,
by Charles Wesley

My Dear Friends in Christ,

A very holy and blessed Ascension Day to all of you! I've always enjoyed the way the great hymn-writer Charles Wesley narrates Jesus' 'homecoming' having him ascend glorious to his native skies. As though inviting heaven to welcome again their redeeming hero to the place where he belongs, Wesley writes: There the glorious triumph waits; / lift your heads, eternal gates! / Wide unfold the radiant scene; / take the King of glory in! Some, (slightly irreverent) part of me wants further to exclaim: Break out the good china! Dust off the throne! He's back! Let the celebrations begin!!

The serious truth, however, is that our Lord's Ascension completes the 'circle of salvation' one that begins with Christ's birth, with the Word taking flesh; continues through his teaching and ministry and his calling of disciples; and culminates in his death and resurrection, and in his final commissioning of those same disciples to teach and heal and testify in his name. In both theological and literary terms, it must have seemed to the gospel writers, and to the early Church, that Jesus' work on earth was completed; and that there was no other satisfying way to end the story but to have him leave the earth, like the prophet Elijah before him, in ascending, vindicating glory. There was no other place for him to go but up!

There's a symmetry to such a narrative, of course, even a kind of poetry. But it may obscure the real point behind the Ascension, which is that Christ must leave the earth so that we who remain can continue the earthly work he began. Indeed, in one critical sense, salvation history has not at all ended, but rather is waiting for us to fulfill it. The narrative is not over; we have but turned a page.

So the Evangelist John, although writing a generation or more after Luke and Matthew, has Jesus all but insist on the need for his departure, declaring to his disciples: *I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father* (14:12). In another passage, Jesus tells them that unless he goes, they cannot receive the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who will guide and strengthen them for this 'greater work' they are to perform in the world.

It was, I'm sure, this awareness of the lasting consequences of Our Lord's Ascension that prompted the medieval mystic and Doctor of the Church, Theresa of Avila, to make her now famous assertion, one that speaks to the very purpose and reason for our lives in ministry:

Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world... Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Recognizing this sacred reality is central to our calling as Christians in every time and period of life. It is particularly vital to remember, however, during this time of national and global crisis a time when our fears and anxieties, and when the often crippling weight of uncertainty, are likely to get the better of us; when we are faced with death and suffering of the kind the world has seldom witnessed; a time when our own lives and those of our loved ones may seem irreparably altered. Even as we seek strength and guidance in the consolation of prayer, we can at the same time feel that same strength and sense of direction already emanating from our own hands and feet and eyes from and through the power of Christ alive in us, Christ whose Body we are, and the only one others ever will know on this earth.

Yet there is one further thing we should remember about the Ascension, and it concerns Jesus' resurrected body now taken up in glory. It has to do with his wounds they are the same in heaven as they were on earth, the marks of his sacrifice, the prints of love. This tells us that though wounded ourselves, though fearful and frustrated and confused, though feeling helpless in the face of this present peril, the spirit and power of Christ still abides in us, wounds and all. It tells us that while we have breath, while we have blood in our veins and hope in our hearts, while we have Christ's body alive in our own body, we can do all the works that he did and greater works than these.

May we take both comfort and courage from these thoughts, as we continue to walk this rugged, wounded, glorious path together. And let our own minds and spirits ascend with Christ through lives of loving sacrifice, in ways that give joy and that make for peace. Let us find our heaven of heavens through the faith we live in the world he came to save.

Many Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +