

In the name of ✝ Jesus!

The last several days, praying with our sister Marcile, and pondering with her these texts of the Ascension of our Lord, have shown the importance of this Festival. Not only do the Scriptures give account of His ascension, but our creeds highlight it: the resurrected Jesus “ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead” (Apostles’ Creed). “The third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end” (Nicene Creed). I didn’t pray the Athanasian Creed with Marcile, but it’s in there, too. And as we prayed the Commendation of the Dying, we prayed, “By your resurrection and ascension, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, help us good Lord.” The Ascension is part of the hope we have in our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ ascension is important. It is the culmination of what He did for us on earth. Like in His descent from heaven, heralded by angels proclaiming to shepherds the Messiah’s birth, so here at Jesus’ ascension, angels are there proclaiming to disciples that Jesus will come again in like manner as He left, on the clouds. He will come again in glory with angels again at His side to bring to consummation God’s plan of salvation for mankind, to effect our own resurrection and ascension. “*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord*” (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

Which is why the ascension of our Lord is also a time of celebration. We celebrate not just Jesus’ departure from earth and His return to His rightful place at the Father’s right hand (Eph. 1:20) — for we know it is to our advantage (John 16:7), but we also look forward to and celebrate Jesus’ promised return. That’s what the disciples did after Jesus “*parted from them and was carried up into heaven,*” ... they celebrated; “*they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.*”

For even though there was more yet to come — the Father’s promise of “*power from on high*”, the disciples were starting to understand. Jesus had been sent from the Father with a purpose, and He had now accomplished that purpose. He had done the Father’s will. He had drunk the bitter cup of the world’s sins. He had drunk it to the dregs, and He did it that His bride might taste her salvation, that her lips might taste the nectar that flows from His wounds and that fills the cup from which we now drink: forgiveness in His blood, life and salvation.

For Jesus had accomplished His work of love—yes, it was a work that cost Him His own life’s blood; it was a work that required Him to pass through death and Hades for you, enduring these for you. But with this work accomplished, He would this day ascend to heaven as conqueror, not amidst whirlwind and fire, but with the clouds as His chariot. Jesus would return to heaven to take up His rightful place at the Father’s right hand, crowned as King over heaven and earth.

Ah! This is more like it, we think! This finally seems kingly — rather than the King wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger, rather than the King worshipped in obscurity by Gentile wise men, rather than the King pursued by murderous Herod and fleeing for His life. This is so much more kingly than riding into the Holy City on a donkey’s foal, rejected by His subjects with cries of “*Crucify Him. ... We have no king but Caesar*” (John 19:15). This is more kingly than being mocked with a “royal robe” and a reed for a scepter, crowned with thorns (Matt. 27:28-29). In His ascension, our King is enthroned in heaven, crowned with glory.

To be sure, this is our King now, in His kingdom not of this world, whose throne is at the Father’s side. This is our King now, into whose hands have been given all things, who is head over all things, who fills all things. This is our King now, the King of Kings, who has been granted all authority in heaven and on earth, who subjects all things to His kingship: even death and life, angels and rulers, things present, things to come, the powers, height, depth, all things in creation. But we can’t have this risen and ascended King without having a lowly, fleshly, suffering, crucified King. We may like one more than the other, but He is one and the same King.

Our King is He who in His ascension lifted up to the Father’s right hand the human nature He received from His virgin mother. Though very God, St. Paul says, our King took on the form of a servant “*being born in the likeness of men*” and humbled Himself to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7). It is with that same servant’s form, but now exalted in resurrection victory, that Jesus ascended, as we just sang, raising up “*our human nature On the clouds to God’s right hand; There we sit in heavenly places, There with [Him] in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne*” (TLH218:5).

Our King has ascended into heaven, and yet He remains near. “*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near*” (Is. 55:6). For in our flesh, He is always near. He sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, and advocates for us with the Father, which is why we can “*with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.*” Through Christ’s mediation we know that we shall “*receive mercy and find grace to help in [our] time of need*” (Heb. 4:16).

Our King is indeed near as He promised. *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matt. 28:20). He is near in the word that falls like rain from heaven, in the water that brings forth and sprouts faith, or that slakes the thirsty soul, in the bread and wine that satisfy our longing for forgiveness and life, rich food that is a foretaste of the feast to come. For our King and our God who partakes still of our human nature and has ascended into heaven has opened the way to heaven for us, that we washed, repentant, forgiven, fed with His body and blood, might also ascend. *“Mighty Lord, in Thine ascension We by faith behold our own”* (TLH218:5), for Jesus went before us to prepare a place for each of us, so that when He comes again as promised, *“He will take you to Himself, that where He is, you may be also”* (John 14:3).

Therefore, let us celebrate with His disciples and the whole church this festival of Jesus’ ascension. Let us *“shout to God with loud songs of joy. ... God has gone up with a shout”* (Ps. 47:1, 5). Let us *“sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth”* (Ps. 47:6-7) and He will come again to take us unto Himself. He will give us a crown. We who have been given *“the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of [our] hearts enlightened,”* we who *“know what is the hope to which he has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”* (Eph. 1:17-18), we who are faithful unto death, He will give the crown of everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!