

When I was in elementary school, my mother took me out of school once a year on a Thursday to go to church for the feast of the Ascension so I totally agreed with St Augustine who called it the crown of all Christian festivals.¹ The Ascension is celebrated on the Thursday that comes forty days after Easter, but we no longer have a service that day.

So it is the focus of our worship this morning instead. The Ascension is one of the major events in the life of Jesus Christ, when he disappeared out of the sight of his friends for the final time and went to a different dimension which we have traditionally called heaven.

We can think of Jesus' life as having five major events or some might say, initiations:

- Birth/Incarnation
- Baptism
- Transfiguration
- Crucifixion/Resurrection
- Ascension

If we put these within the context of the Christ then we can add Creation and the Omega Point. The Christ became flesh or incarnated at Jesus' birth and completely rejoined the Godhead taking humanity with him at the Ascension. Except that rejoined is the wrong word because the Christ was never not part of the Godhead even when he lived on this planet as and in Jesus. By returning to "heaven" Jesus the Christ was no longer limited to one place or time. During his incarnation Jesus was necessarily limited but after his ascension he again became unlimited, no longer restrained by the time and space confines of humanity.

¹ <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2009/05/ascension-politics/>

In the evolution of human understanding about God as seen in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we initially understood God to be very local, found only in special places such as Beth-el where Jacob dreamt of angels going up and down a ladder and spoke with God. When he woke up,” he said: ‘Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not.... ‘How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’ Later God travelled with the nomadic Hebrews in the Ark of the Covenant and resided in the Holy of Holy’s. Once the temple was built in Jerusalem, that was where God lived, and those who wished to worship God needed to travel to Jerusalem to do so. But when at the time of the Exile, the temple was destroyed the prophet Ezekiel saw God leave his accustomed place above the cherubim of the ark. He said “the glory of the LORD ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city. The spirit lifted me up and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen left me.” (Ezek.11:23,24)

In exile, the people of Israel realized that God was there also. So gradually awareness developed that God is everywhere. Wherever we are, God is. As the psalmist said, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:6,7)

God is everywhere, the Christ is in and through all Creation. As a result of the Ascension, the Christ who is also Jesus, who knows exactly what it means to be human, is in all things. Jesus is in another dimension where he is available to us his 21st century followers just as he was to his 1st century disciples, and in fact more so because he is available to all creation all at the same time.

The downside of this may be that when God is everywhere, in our minds God almost ceases to be anywhere, and so it is important that we

continue to create holy spaces – places where for whatever reason, God seems to be especially close. One place in the forest became sacred for me on vacation because there I felt God very present through the trees. It seemed that they were in pain and were asking for human love. I'm not sure how we love trees, but please let the trees you know, know that you love them.

We make sacred space when we connect deeply and unconditionally with another human being, such as in the early bond between mother and child, or when we listen to another carefully and compassionately.

We also create sacred space here in this place. Whenever a place is used regularly for prayer and worship, it becomes a place where the sense of God's presence is multiplied by our own intention. Jesus told us that wherever two or three are gathered in his Name, there he is in the midst of them (Matt 18:20), so whenever we gather with the intention of serving or worshipping God, we can be sure that we are creating sacred space. The ascended Christ is present with us.

The writer to the Ephesians goes further. Jesus is not just fully available to all, but God has “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 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 for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph 1:22,23) This is of course a metaphor: most of us don't think that God the Creator is on a throne somewhere the Jesus the Christ on another throne next to him. Rather it is a picture of the importance of the Christ. The Christ who is now human as well as God. He is of equal importance of equal importance to the Creator, the Christ has been given power over everything.

I think this was a source of great hope for the early church, as it can be for us. Everything may seem to be going to hell in a handbasket but Jesus the Christ is still in authority above all earthly rule and authority, power and dominion. His name still carries more weight than any human name. Everything that is going on here however awful it seems, is only one part of the reality. Although there are times when it seems that chaos and suffering and mayhem are winning, the battle has already been won, Jesus *is* the sovereign of the world.

And there will come a time when everything is restored to its proper place and purpose, when all things are brought into balance, when the reign of God is visible and available to all beings. This has traditionally been called the Day of Judgment and artists and preachers have given us all sorts of horrifying images of what it means that Jesus will “come again to judge the living and the dead” as the Creed says.

Many of these ideas come from prophetic warnings intended to bring people up short and make them realize that they cannot just disregard God without dire consequences. God’s love for us is complete and unconditional. The scriptures are quite clear that God’s intention is the redemption of all creation, and we are part of creation. It’s difficult to imagine how that redemption will come about. With the environmental crisis upon us and the unwillingness of this administration to do anything positive to improve the situation, things seem pretty grim.

But we can be sure that the Christ who ascended, the Christ who sits at God’s right hand and who has the authority over everything, that Christ, knows what it is to be human and to live in difficult circumstances. And that Christ is the one in whom all things hold together.

There’s a poem by W.B. Yeats called the Second Coming which was written in the aftermath of the First World War. It starts like this:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...

We can be sure that the center will hold because the center is the ascended Christ. Making Christ the center of our individual lives provides an anchoring point, a place where there can be a quiet center that brings everything into right alignment. Christ is the center of the unfolding universe, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. We can be sure that whatever happens, the center will hold and all Creation will be redeemed in Christ.