

A Service of the Word for Ascension Day

On this fortieth day of Easter the Church celebrates the exaltation of Jesus. It's recounted twice over by St Luke. The friend of sinners, the good shepherd, the crucified Messiah ascends to 'heaven', to the presence of the Father. And not for his glory, but as our pioneer and high priest. We earth-dwellers are being invited and exalted to live as citizens of heaven. So in these final days of Eastertide, and in preparation for the feast of Pentecost, we pray ardently for the gift of the Spirit of Jesus, the Wind that blows through earth and heaven and binds us to God and to one another



Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed, alleluia!

Blessed are you, Lord of heaven and earth,
to you be glory and praise for ever.
From the darkness of death you have raised your Christ
to the right hand of your majesty on high.
The pioneer of our faith, his mission accomplished,
has opened for us the way to heaven
and sends on us his promised Spirit.
May we be ready to follow the Way
and so be brought to the glory of his presence
where songs of triumph for ever sound:
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

Seeing we have a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, and make our confession to our heavenly Father:

Silence for self-examination, followed by prayer for forgiveness:

Lord Jesus, you raise us to new life: Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you forgive us our sins: Christ have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you feed us with the living bread: Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Prayer of absolution, then let us sing in praise of God:

Glory to God, glory to God, glory to the Father.

Glory to God, glory to God, glory to the Father.

To God be glory for ever.

To God be glory for ever.

Alleluia, amen, **alleluia, amen,**

Alleluia, amen, **alleluia, amen, alleluia, amen ...**

Glory to God, glory to God, glory to Christ Jesus ...

Glory to God, glory to God, glory to the Spirit ...

Silent prayer, followed by the collect for the day:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,

that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ

to have ascended into the heavens,

so we in heart and mind may also ascend

and with him continually dwell;

who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave

Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.'

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'



When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

Thanks be to God.

Psalm 47, with the response, O sing praises to God, sing praises!

Clap your hands together, all you peoples: O sing to God with shouts of joy.
For the Lord Most High is to be feared: he is the great King over all the earth. **R**

He subdues the people under us, and the nations under our feet.
He has chosen our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loves. **R**

God has gone up with a merry noise, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet.
O sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth: sing praises with all your skill. **R**

God reigns over the nations; God has taken his seat upon his holy throne.
The nobles of the peoples are gathered together,
with the people of the God of Abraham.
For the powers of the earth belong to God, and he is very highly exalted. **R**

Gospel acclamation:

Alleluia, alleluia!

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people
and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Alleluia!

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke:

Glory to you, O Lord!

Jesus said to the apostles, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you

what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ!



We might envy those apostles, 'continually in the temple blessing God'. For we are locked out of our temples, no longer permitted to gather there. Blessing God has become something very different from when we could sing and eat and drink together – and from when we shall be able to do so again.

if we are shut out of our churches, does that mean that we are shut out also from the presence of God? Surely not: isn't God everywhere? She cannot be enclosed in our buildings, or indeed in our communities or our hearts, like some moth trapped in a flame. God is everywhere.

Everywhere – or indeed, nowhere. For God is Spirit, the wind that blows where it will. There is something absurd about calling anywhere 'the house of God'. Yet, since we live in space and time, most of us need those absurdities – or, to be more polite, those sacred symbols.

Symbolically, in the Bible and in most ancient religion, the dwelling-place of God is a temple – man-made, solid, stony. But not just there. The symbolic dwelling-place of God or the gods is also something extensive, airy, unmanufactured: that is, the sky, the limitless heavens. There is the home of God and of God's ethereal courtiers. And thither some very exceptional or heroic mortals may be privileged to ascend.

We know, of course – and most who seriously thought about in in earlier ages knew too – that this vertical gap between the home of gods and the home of mortals cannot be taken literally. If I climb a mountain or a tower I shall not automatically be closer to God. 'Why stand looking up to heaven?' the apostles are asked.

Scientific cosmology is vastly different from that of the ancient world. Yet perhaps the cosmology of our imagination has changed less. Perhaps the symbolic language of heaven and earth is still profoundly true. So that Jesus' 'ascension into heaven' is real, important, and the ground for blessing God.

'Why stand looking up to heaven?' Any attempts at realistic representation of Christ's Ascension that I've seen in paintings or church windows are rather preposterous: Jesus having flying lessons, or attempting the long jump, or a chapel with the soles of his feet moulded into the ceiling. No, the point is that he, our brother man, is leading the way for us into the divine life. If we are the Body of Christ, then we are in heaven, alive in God. Heaven is not just the home of God and of Christ, it is our home too.

Nevertheless, why stand looking up to heaven? Before all this goes to our heads, we are reminded, as were the apostles, that even if heaven is our home and Jesus has gone ahead, the way there begins in our familiar dwelling-places on earth. Here is where our feet are planted, here is where we are given companions for living and a natural world to inhabit. Here too is where the Spirit of God is at work.

Specifically, the apostles are told to wait and to witness. Wait for the outpouring of God's Spirit, the wind and the fire which they and we shall celebrate at Pentecost: Spirit which is the source of truth and joy and which binds heaven and earth in one. And then, in the Spirit's power, bear witness to that truth, by telling the story of Jesus and by living it in mutual love and striving for justice.

Yes, Jesus has departed, the men left are bereaved. And we too know about bereavement and separation, perhaps more acutely in these strange times. Yet in the absence of their friend they did not mourn or hide; rather, we are told, they 'returned with great joy' and 'were continually in the temple blessing God'. With or without our temple, can we too wait and witness with joy, as citizens of heaven in earth our beautiful home?

Prayer for the world:

- for the gift of the Holy Spirit to fill our world with love and joy and peace;
- for responsible and truthful leadership in the world's nations;
- for all who follow Jesus our great high priest, especially those isolated or persecuted – for their safety and their freedom;
- for all enclosed in home, hospital, prison or refugee camp – for restoration to abundant living;
- for those who are lonely, and all from whom we are separated;
- for key workers and all on whom we depend for daily needs;
- for all in distress or in sickness, especially sufferers from Covid-19;
- for the dying, the bereaved and the departed – for our rejoicing together in Christ crucified, risen and exalted in glory ...

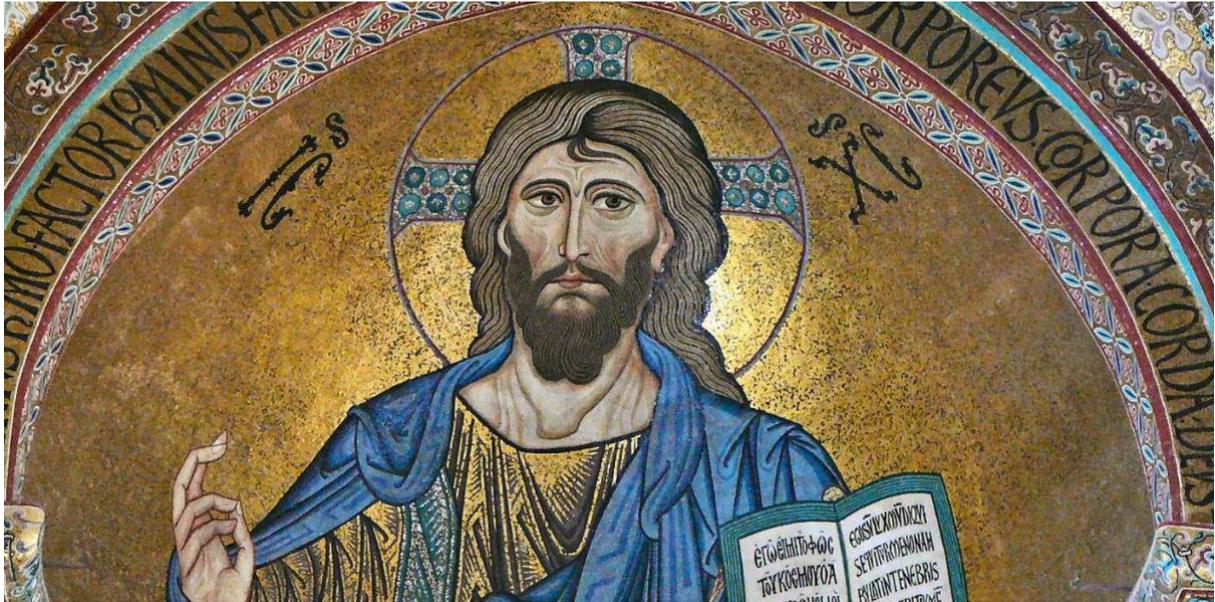
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

An act of Spiritual Communion:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given me, for all the pains and insults you have borne for me. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, I ask you to come spiritually into my heart. O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester



Post-Communion Prayer and Blessing:

Risen Christ,
you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven:
help us to seek and serve you,
that we may join you at the Father's side,
where you reign with the Spirit in glory,
now and for ever. **Amen.**

Christ our ascended King pour upon us the abundance of his gifts
and bring us to reign with him in glory;
and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit, be with us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Let us go in the peace of Christ, alleluia, alleluia!

Thanks be to God, alleluia, alleluia!