

The Ascension of our Lord

Colleagues, Today is probably the most uncelebrated “Feast of our Lord” in the whole church year—at least among Christians in the USA. Lutherans included. Signal of its insignificance may be the glitch in the Thrivent “Lutheran Pastor’s Desk Diary–2006” that puts Ascension—mirabile dictu!—on Friday this year! Not so. It’s always a Thursday—40 days after Easter and 10 days before Pentecost. It’s always Thursday theology.

But it does get attention in the “old country.” Even secularized Germany. For folks there Ascension is a national holiday. Today, May 25, is a day off. We learned that 50 years ago when we were grad students in Germany. Granted, though worship was happening in the churches, most folks were elsewhere. Especially the guys. It was tradition for “Männer” to be off somewhere (preferably outdoors) for a stag event, getting “high” themselves on stuff unlinked to Christ’s own elevation.

But Ascension was a bigger deal here at home when I was a kid. We always went to church. I’ve just compared the two Lutheran hymnals that bracket my life. My “old” LCMS hymnal from those days has 12 Ascension hymns in it. Guess what the ELCA’s Lutheran Book of Worship has? Four.

So just what is the “Thursday Theology” of the Ascension of our Lord? I could get to that merely by printing out the text of some of those hymns for the day, many of which I memorized in Immanuel Lutheran parochial school. The first one that comes to mind is “On Christ’s Ascension I now build the hope of mine ascension.” If Christian hope is “built” on Christ’s ascension, it must be important. Or was hymnwriter Josua Wegelin (1636) exaggerating?

Well then, how about Venerable Bede—a whole millennium earlier

in the seventh century? [By the way, Bede is the only Englishman whom Dante names in the Paradiso of his Divine Comedy.]

*A hymn of glory let us sing;
New songs throughout the world shall ring:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Christ by a road before untrod,
Ascendeth to the throne of God.
Alleluia! (5x)*

Bede's major metaphor in the verse is that "road before untrod." That "road" is the "Thursday theology" of Ascension. And to get more help on that, you have to go to the Gospel of John, which Bede was translating on the day he died. Mark says nothing about ascension. Neither does Matthew. Luke makes it the literary linch-pin between his two volumes of Luke-Acts, telling of it as his last paragraph in volume one and the first episode reported in volume two. But it is John who theologizes about ascension—and about that "road before untrod," namely, the "way of the cross."

So what does John do? First off, he messes up the calendar. There's no 40-day interlude twixt Easter and Ascension for John, nor any 10 more days to Pentecost. No, it all happens on one day. Easter, Ascension, Pentecost are the same day, the "day that sees him rise"—first from the tomb and then back to the Father. Then before sunset he's back again with his terrified disciples to "breathe" onto them the Holy Spirit. See for yourself. They are all compressed in John's Easter Sunday story, chapter 20. So when Thomas shows up seven days later, it's already a week after Ascension, a week after Pentecost. Thomas is the first post-Pentecost Christian.

The "road before untrod" is signalled in the death-marks of Jesus' hands, feet, side. They are not an embarrassment to his

Lordship, but the trademarks thereof. Upside-down lordship carries topsy-turvy trademarks.

But back to the ascension in John 20. It comes—in just one verse (17)—in the recognition encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (pace Dan Brown!) at the open tomb. Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

What’s all in that one verse? Bob Bertram of blessed memory liked to exegete it this way: For John, Jesus’s job is to get the renegade, even bastard, children of God back to the Father. Get them to be “born of God” again as indicated in John’s prolog (chapter 1) and the Nicodemus dialogue (chap.3). So although the job is done as the sun lowers on Good Friday (in Greek it’s but one word: Tetelestai – “It is finished” or “case closed”), the completion of this completion is to get the “kids” themselves back home to Abba.

So as the second-last lap of Easter Jesus makes a trip back home. But not returning empty-handed. He’s got all the rescued kids along with him. These are the ones who “received him, who believed in his name,” who now have the “right to be called children of God.” (1:12) So he takes his new siblings along with him back home. “Look, Dad. Look who—who all—I’ve brought along with me.”

Then comes the final-lap of Jesus’ Easter, according to John. Jesus himself comes back to the locked rooms where weak-faithed and frightened disciples are gathered (and who of us isn’t in their midst?) and “pentecosts” them with the power-pack they’ll need for the long haul. John’s label for this second-wind-supplier is “the paraclete.” And with the triad complete—Easter, Ascension, Pentecost—Jesus sends them, sends us, on our way: “As

the Father has sent me, so send I you.”

For John it’s all one ball of wax. Jesus brings us “bad kids” back home to Papa by this way before untrod. He went into the treadmill, and came out the other side carrying us along right back to the Father where he himself started. And is John not telling us that upon his return from this home-visit late Easter Day, he had “Papa’s” approval to literally put Papa’s own Spirit—wind, breath, “juice”—into the former renegade, but now rehabilitated, kids? What else can it mean that THREE times in this pericope he says “Peace be with you”? No more enmity between kids and Papa. And all “finished” by virtue of his taking that “way before untrod.”

Christ’s ascension is not a synonym for his “real absence,” but the exact opposite. Call it “paracletic presence,” the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the stuff that Luther proclaimed when unpacking the third article of the Apostles Creed. “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or connect to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the [preached] Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

And what is the paraclete’s fundamental transaction? Making sure that the Christ-connected never sin again? Not at all. Fearful believers—yes, sinful believers— are kept “in union with Christ” by the forgiveness of sins. Not just once, but over and over again. “In this Christian church the paraclete daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers.” For how long? “Until the last day [when] he will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

Listen to Ascension's Thursday theology in William C. Dix's hymn:

*Alleluia! Sing to Jesus;
His the scepter, his the throne;
Alleluia! His the triumph,
His the victory alone.
Hark! The songs of peaceful Zion
Thunder like a mighty flood:
"Jesus out of every nation
Has redeemed us by his blood."
Alleluia! Not as orphans
Are we left in sorrow now;
Alleluia! He is near us;
Faith believes, nor questions how,
Though the cloud from sight received him
When the forty days were o'er,
Shall our hearts forget his promise:
"I am with you evermore"?*

*Alleluia! Bread of heaven,
Here on earth our food, our stay;
Alleluia! Here the sinful
Flee to you from day to day.
Intercessor, friend of sinners,
Earth's redeemer, hear our plea
Where the songs of all the sinless
Sweep across the crystal sea.*

*Alleluia! King eternal,
Lord omnipotent we own;
Alleluia! Born of Mary,
Earth your footstool, heav'n your throne.
As within the veil you entered,
Robed in flesh, our great high priest,*

*Here on earth both priest and victim
In the eucharistic feast.
[LBW 158]*

That's Ascension's good news. A Feast of our Lord worth celebrating. Thursday theology indeed!

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder.