

Evensong 9 May 2021

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My Homily today deals with the Ascension of Jesus.

The Ascension of Jesus only occurs in Luke's Gospel and his companion book the Acts of the Apostles and today we have listened to both accounts.

In Luke 24: verse 44-46 Jesus appears to his disciples undeniably alive. Sure, he can walk through walls and appear and disappear, but he can also eat fish. Jesus is confirming the authenticity of his life, ministry and teachings, and he is now appearing to his friends a final time with something important to say before he ascends to the Father.

Jesus opens the disciple's minds so that they can understand the scriptures (v45), and once their minds are open it all becomes clear. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (Jn 1:1). Jesus is the revealed word of God and for these disciples everything is now revealed with a new clarity.

The church is to be rooted in the scriptures and active mission to all nations, and repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ's name.

According to Tom Wright "the Bible always envisaged that when God finally acted to fulfil all the promises made to Abraham, Moses and the Prophets then the whole world would be brought into the embrace of God's saving and healing love"<sup>1</sup>.

So, this is our Commission too as disciples, just as it was to the first disciples.

The only way forward and what we find the hardest is:

- Repentance and forgiveness.
- Active ministry rooted in scripture.
- The resolute application of the Gospel under the Lordship of the risen Jesus, under the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The creation of new hope and new possibilities for us and for the World.

And so, to our painting:

The topic of the Ascension of Jesus to Heaven has been a frequent subject in Christian art.

In reflecting on the painting I was going to use as an inspiration for this Homily on the Ascension of Christ, I kept coming back to this painting by Dosso Dossi, which really speaks to me.

The painting aptly named the Ascension of Christ was painted by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century artist Dosso Dossi, whose real name is Giovanni Francesco di Niccolò di Luteri or Giovanni Luteri.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, Tom (2004). Luke for Everyone. SPCK., p301.

Dosso was a late Italian Renaissance painter and leader of the Ferrarese school in the 16th century. Very little is known about his early life, and his artistic influences and training have long been open to speculation. His name Dosso Dossi comes from the name of the family estate near his place of birth. He had a brother called Battista who was also a painter for the same patron, Alfonso 1st of Ferrara and they frequently collaborated on paintings, especially in Dosso's later years.

The Dukes of Ferrara valued the arts and they fostered an atmosphere of culture and refinement. We know he was greatly influenced by the works of Titian (the greatest renaissance painter of the Venetian School), Raphael from Rome and Giovanni Bellini from Venice, Michelangelo and Romano and you can see these influence coming through in the painting.

Little did I know that there was almost nothing written on this particular painting, possibly because it is in a private collection, although its picture is easily found on the internet as a classic Ascension painting.

Four books from the Kinder theological library and this one book on Dosso make no mention of the painting.

So today I have chosen to draw upon all of my knowledge of 6<sup>th</sup> Form Art History (1977) (I still have the textbook), as well as Theological studies.

The Ascension could be looked on as a sad occasion, Jesus who had died a horrible death, had been resurrected and united with friends, was now disappearing from sight again, but we don't see it that way at all. It is looked upon as a glorious moment in the

life of Jesus, and as such has been a favourite subject for artists. It is a defining moment showing the glory and the power of the Lord, an event where Jesus "was taken up to heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19)

This painting has a number of features in common with other depicting the Ascension at that time. It is also very reminiscent of Raphael's style, colourful, bright, and with a touch of Italian landscape in the background.

Notice that it is divided into two planes: The earthly world below, which Jesus is leaving and a celestial one.

In this case the Virgin Mary is depicted in the middle of the picture (you can just see her in the back). Sometimes, but not in this painting, Jesus is surrounded by a mandorla, an almond shaped frame used to depict a halo, and Mary is in the middle almost touching it, signifying her holiness and connection to Jesus. Often Paul too is depicted below with a sword looking upward towards Jesus. In this case it is possible that the man with stretched out hands is Paul (can anyone think of an issue with that).

Paul was not present at the Ascension; in fact, he didn't convert to Christianity until after Christ ascended. The sword or upstretched arms are a symbol depicting that he was not there at the time. The people depicted below represent the Church.

In the Heavenly realm we see cerebrum and possibly seraphim rejoicing, at least one with a musical instrument (no angels in this one, but this was a feature prior to the renaissance). The main role of both the cherubim and seraphim is to sit at the throne and

worship God. We also see Christ Triumphant holding a resurrection banner. The blessing gesture by Christ with his right hand signifies that he is blessing the entire church (you and I). In Luke 24 verse 51 it states “While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven”.

They worshiped him, and after returning to Jerusalem with great joy as instructed, they waited until the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit, which would rest upon and live inside each believer.

The Good News of God’s love was never meant to be hidden, it was meant to be shared generously with others. In fact, we are instructed by Christ to do so, just as those eyewitnesses to Christ’s life, death and resurrection were. God’s love is for everyone, everywhere, no exceptions. We are called to be evangelists, sharing the news of the Risen Christ, in words but also in deeds.

With Christ’s Ascension and by the power of the Holy Spirit working within each believer, the opportunity arises for the spread of the Gospel to a much wider group than those who would come into contact with a small group of Disciples. The Ascended Christ has entrusted us, you and I, to give witness to the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit working within us, offering new hope and new possibilities for those we come into contact with.

I would like to take a moment to share with you these inspirational words, as we reflect again on the painting.

Ascension Day Sonnet written by Malcolm Guite

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory  
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place  
As earth became a part of Heaven’s story  
And heaven opened to his human face.  
We saw him go and yet we were not parted  
He took us with him to the heart of things  
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted  
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,  
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,  
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,  
Whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness  
And sing the waning darkness into light,  
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,  
Which all creation waits to see revealed .

