

Commentry to the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord



The Feast of the Ascension has got to be one of the most dramatic in the liturgical year. Not perhaps very dramatic in its liturgy which is the same as any other Sunday; but dramatic in what it is all about: the lifting up of the Risen Jesus to his place in heaven.

In the account given in the Acts of the Apostles Jesus was literally lifted up from the earth to heaven. And we can imagine the extraordinary impact that this had on the disciples as he was lifted up right in front of them until a cloud took him from their sight.

Then comes the appearance of two men in white who predict his return on the last day. Their chiding words: 'Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking into the sky?' imply that the disciples should be getting on with the job that Jesus has given them.

This feast marks a crucial hinge point in the history of salvation. Christ having completed his work on this earth returns to be with the Father. The work of salvation is then transferred from the direct

initiative of Christ to the work of the Church in the world. This is the handover moment and it is completed by the Feast of Pentecost which marks the day when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Apostles and the work of the Church really begins.

Academics would refer to the Ascension as a liminal moment. The Latin word *limina* literally means threshold. You will remember that every five years the Bishops are called to Rome to meet the Pope and to give account of their stewardship.

Usually they go in groups from a particular country or region and the Pope makes a speech in which he identifies what he regards as the most important pastoral priorities for the Church in that region for the next few years. These visits are called *ad limina* visits because they are visits to the threshold of the Apostle Peter.

But this idea of a liminal moment or sometimes what is called liminal space has a much wider application. It is nowadays applied to any time of transition or crossing of thresholds. When you cross a threshold you pass from the outside to the inside or vice versa. But in any event it is always a decisive transformation from one thing to another.

There are many liminal moments in life; they are often rites of passage like moving to secondary school, being confirmed, starting your first job, getting married and so on.

There are also liminal spaces, periods of time when we transfer from one mode of being to another. A common one is the journey to work. We have a period of time when we make the transition between our home life and our working life. These interludes are very important, they allow us pools of time when we are neither one thing nor the other; they can be particularly fruitful moments for thinking or meditation or praying.

We are human beings and we need time to adjust to change, to adjust to different modes of being. One important liminal moment is that of entering a Church. My liturgy professor said that the ideal setting for a Church is in a garden. He said that it was important not to simply step off the street into a Church. There should be a garden through which to pass so that each one felt that they were leaving ordinary existence behind, moving from worldly space and time into sacred space and time.

Not all Churches have gardens but they all have porches where that transition can be made. It is another reason why in Catholic Churches we bless ourselves as we cross the threshold moving from the secular to the sacred or vice versa.

The Disciples of Christ had been on a bit of a roller coaster; they had followed Christ around and then made the final journey to Jerusalem; they knew that the entry into Jerusalem was going to mean the inauguration of the Kingdom of God but little did they know how it was going to happen. From the 'high' of Palm Sunday they move to the solemnity of the Last Supper and then they were cast down to the deep despondency of Good Friday.

They are then roused from the depths of depression by reports of the appearance of the Risen Christ. They are puzzled and confused but realise that this is indeed Good News even if they can't make sense of it. Then come the events we celebrate today when the Risen Christ gives them his last instructions and withdraws from their midst.

Then they wait, not even sure what it is they are waiting for. After the roller-coaster ride of the past six weeks they are brought to a sudden halt. Something is sure to happen but they don't know what. They are in a sort of in-between time; a waiting time, a thinking time, a moment of transition from how they are now to something they do not yet know; in other words a liminal space.

And then comes the disturbing but exhilarating events of Pentecost and their new mission becomes clear and they are impelled into the world to begin the great task of making known the Gospel.

But the in-between space is important. It is a time of deepening, a time of consolidation, a time of transformation. It is a time to get into a new role, a space where one life can be left behind and another kind of life begun. It is a time of moving from one certainty through a disconcerting uncertainty only to arrive at a new certainty.

We all need such moments, such spaces. These no-mans-land phases of our lives are vital. We need these moments of dislocation and disturbance and transition in order to reach our full maturity as human beings and as Christians.

They are uncomfortable but necessary, and it is only a pity that modern society seems to think that all discomfort is bad and should be eliminated because without such moments our lives would become disconnected from the greater reality that surrounds us.

The Church knows about these things. They are an important part of its ritual. They are essential to our sacramental life. The design of our buildings and the shape of the liturgy give us the structures we need to make the transitions which, while often uncomfortable, are so necessary for our lives.

Christ rose to his rightful place at the side of the Father. But, just as those men in white prophesied, he will return and his return on that last great day will be to lift us up to be with him forever. That will be the last, greatest and most definitive transition of our lives.

That prophesy was made to those Apostles who were standing with their eyes gazing on heaven not knowing what to say or do or think. If we can identify with them then we know that those words are addressed to us too.

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