

Even to this day, being on someone's right is a place of honour



A teacher asked her class of nine-year-olds to draw a picture of the Ascension. Not surprisingly most of them did a fairly conventional portrait of Jesus rising up into the clouds. One of her students, David, who was a particularly gifted artist, had Jesus blasting off into the sky. Down the side of Jesus' white garment was the word "Nasa".

When David displayed his picture to the class, he provided all the sound effects that he imagined must have accompanied Christ's Ascension. He concluded his presentation by saying, without a hint of irony, "... the Ascension must have been a real blast"! All the other kids said in chorus: "Awesome."

None of us can blame David for marrying our modern culture with an ancient story. In fact if some of us are honest, David's "space shuttle Jesus" is not far from what we might think as well.

The Ascension stories, however, are not primarily interested in how or when Jesus got back to Heaven. John and Paul never mention it at all. Mark and Matthew have it happening on the same day as the Resurrection and Luke has it occurring 40 days after Easter on the same day as Pentecost. The one thing on which all the New Testament writers agree is where in Heaven Jesus went and where he is presently – at God's right hand.

Even to this day, being on someone's right is a place of honour. Imagine being invited to Buckingham Palace or the White House and finding that you have been placed on the right hand of the Queen or the President. In the Old Testament, being on the right hand of David, Samuel or Elijah was to be the anointed and favoured one, the true son or daughter. And it survives in popular culture too.

Game of Thrones may be too explicit on every level for many people, but it remains the most-watched drama ever on subscription television. Of all the characters in this story, the most important person after the reigning monarch is "the Hand of the King".

He is regularly just referred to as "The Hand" and wears a coveted brooch depicting a hand so as to

designate his authority.

In telling us, then, that Jesus is now at God's right hand, the gospels use shorthand to state that God affirms everything Jesus said and did on earth, and that he therefore is the One for us to follow. However, in the gospels Jesus goes one step further and teaches us that where he is, so shall we be, that he is going to prepare a place for us, and that, in and through him, we will have life and have it to the full.

The Feast of the Ascension is the day, each year, when we remember and we celebrate that, just as Jesus was welcomed to God's right hand, so, too, we may be welcomed to the symbolic right hand of Jesus. This is his promise, this is our faith and this is the hope we are called to proclaim to the world.

And let us be clear about the invitation. There is nothing we have ever done, are doing or will do, that will get our name removed from the guest list to the feast of Christ's Kingdom. The challenge is accepting that we have a standing invitation and to live lives worthy of the love that got us invited in the first place.

The second piece of shorthand in the Ascension stories is the mountaintop. Almost every time someone in the Scriptures goes up a mountain, or to the hill country, a significant encounter with God ensues. Mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible, mountains are where people felt close to God and were the locations for conversions, commissionings and worship. The Ascension is our yearly call to conversion of life and being commissioned to live our baptism in spirit and in truth.

The third piece of shorthand in Luke's account of the Ascension concerns the 40 days. In the Bible, this period is always a time of formation, and so Christ does not send the disciples out cold, but has been preparing them to proclaim that all people now possess the dignity of belonging to the family of God and are invited to sit at the hand of God.

And as we go out to the world, we are given an eternal promise – that Christ abides before us, behind us, over and in us, within and without us, now and forever. I am not sure we could think of a greater blast that could fill us more with awe.

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