

Ascension : a Vision of Eternity – Easter 7

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17:1-11

Eternity

As I read and re-read the readings for today, I found myself grappling with the idea of eternity and eternal life. Our God is a God of infinite goodness, infinite faithfulness, and, it seems to me, infinite patience with the limitations and vulnerabilities with which we all struggle. Eternal life may perhaps be expressed as infinite life, life without limits, not just infinity of time, as eternity is often understood, but infinity of being, of loving relationship and community, as well as of time and space, both spiritual and physical.

The ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father is a moment that expresses this eternity or infinity.

Linear thinking

We are accustomed to thinking of the ascension as the final moment of Jesus' resurrected life on earth. We tend to be linear thinkers and time-lines help us to tidy up our thinking by time and place. We tell the story of Jesus in sequence – his birth, his growing up, his ministry, his death and resurrection, and finally his ascension – all anchored in a sequence of time and an array of named places.

The telling moment

But there are other ways of reading events. Often in scripture we come across “the telling moment”. These are pivotal times or events that tell us something important about God, about the world or about ourselves – often all three things at once. These moments are recognised by their depth rather than by their duration or their place in a temporal sequence.

The ascension is one of these telling moments that links infinite place (heaven and earth), infinite time (the past, present and future), and infinite relationship (God and humankind and all creation), all coming together in Jesus.

Place

Many artists have depicted their own vision of the ascension. Here Albrecht Durer shows a clear focus on heaven and the cloud-covered glory of God, but he also shows the ascended Christ as forever linked to earth through both his physical footprints and his faithful disciples. His disciples will ultimately walk in his footsteps, and be empowered to witness to him. *You will receive power*

when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

So, in this depiction of the ascension we have the infinite, limitless eternity of place (heaven and earth) held together with the continuing eternity of the relationship between Jesus, the Father to whom he returns, and his disciples.

Time

In the ascension reading from Acts we are also pointed to a different vision of time. When the disciples ask when Jesus will restore the kingdom of Israel, they are told that not just the time of what they hope for but all times and periods are under the authority of the Father. The disciples may not be granted their desired knowledge of time but they can and will have power. This power will not be the power of an earthly kingdom of Israel but far greater. It will be a measure of God's infinite power – the power of the Holy Spirit. This was not just a power to be but a power to do. And what they would do would be to witness to the whole world.

Let us return to the Gospel reading and what Jesus said about the divine eternity of time, as he approached his coming death and resurrection, and subsequent ascension to the Father.

This is part of quite a long discourse, packed with meaning. In today's reading Jesus prays about the hour that has come (the imminent present of his death) but he also talks about the past of his unity with the Father from the beginning of time, and about the future of eternal life. This description of eternal life is not just life without end but also infinite, limitless life to the full in all its depth of knowledge and relationship. It is the fullness of a life lived in Christ.

Limitless relationship

The gift of eternal life given in Christ is described right in the middle of Jesus prayer to be glorified that he might also show the glory of the Father.

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (John 17:1-5)

This limitless relationship of eternal life is further extended in verses 6-11 as Jesus speaks about his relationship with the Father and with his disciples who were given to him from the Father. Jesus then presages the ascension where he no longer remains in the world but his disciples, who are in limitless relationship with Jesus and the Father, will remain in the world in certain belief and the power of God's Holy Spirit.

Let us now picture the disciples at the moment of Jesus' ascension. They are no longer devastated by the death of Jesus. They are no longer hiding from the authorities. They are ready; they are prepared; they are keyed up. They know that Jesus is risen. They know that they will be his witnesses. They have seen their resurrected Lord on earth and they have seen him ascended to the Father. They have been told to wait in Jerusalem for just a few days and they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We know how that will happen but they do not. Not yet. But they are certain that it will happen. Jesus has promised this great gift. What should they do?

Where to next?

When in doubt just take the next step. They are urged into action. *Men of Galilee*, said the two men in white, *why do you stand here looking into the sky?* So the disciples returned to Jerusalem, as they were instructed. It wasn't far, a Sabbath walk, about 1 kilometre.

Get moving, they are told. *Jesus will return*. So they go. They return to Jerusalem and gather together to pray, not just the eleven but also the women and Jesus' family. They later choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, and they wait.

They wait.

Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost. As we wait, we can try to imagine how those first disciples waited.

Are we also ready, prepared, keyed up, knowing that Jesus is our risen Lord and knowing that we are and will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses? Can you feel the excitement rising?

Are you ready to step into the infinite? It's not the twilight zone. It is the infinite love and power of God. John says, *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

We can know the love of God in Jesus, not just with our minds but with our hearts and souls and with our lives.

In response to God's love in Christ, as it says in verse 4 of today's psalm,

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him—his name is the LORD. (Psalm 68.4)