Sermon on Ascension Sunday 2019

Today we’re focusing, not on the Seventh Sunday of Easter but on the event celebrated around the world this past Thursday.

I find it ironic that this event is still a holiday in parts of so-called secular Europe and, believe it or not, in the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, but most people in North America, supposedly a more “Christian area” never observe it at all let alone get to celebrate it as a public holiday; I’m referring to the Ascension of Jesus.

St. Augustine once said “This is the festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished.”

What has North American Christianity forgotten?

We all know, whether we’ve ever tried to perform a magic trick or not, that the actual trick is to get us to look somewhere else other than at the crucial moment, usually well before “the trick happens” so that we don’t perceive what’s actually going on.

Perhaps you noticed the question in our first reading, the question the two men in white ask the gawking disciples as Jesus is taken from their sight, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

Psst, you’re looking in the wrong spot; the action is going on someplace else! We recognize that this is the second time in Luke’s writings that we’ve encountered these two men.

One chapter earlier, in Luke’s chronology, Luke 24, the women go to the tomb and are, in that case as well, greeted by Jesus’ absence, the disappeared body of Jesus and suddenly, there too, two men in dazzling clothing appear and ask them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Psst, you’re looking in the wrong spot; the action is going on someplace else!

The symmetry is undeniable; Luke’s too good of a writer for it not to be. The two questions together pointing us towards a meaning behind what we initially see.

Just as we know that there’s something we’ve missed that tells us that the rabbit pulled from the hat really wasn’t underneath the hat when it was on the magician’s head though we can’t prove it; just so, we know that there’s a lot more going on with these events that are at the foundation of our faith than a body that is not in the tomb and a body rising on a cloud out of our sight.

So, first off, and to say it as baldly as I can, the language used by Luke to describe this event—he’s the only gospel writer who does, the two instances we read, the gospel reading and the fuller account in our first reading—are meant to speak to a particular Jewish and Roman context.

If you were a Jew alive at this time living in some “Jewish quarter” in some city of the Roman empire and if, at the invitation of a friend, you went along to a meeting of this strange sect called “Christians” and if while there this story was read out loud you’d immediately, as a knowledgeable Jew, think of the apocalyptic metaphor in the prophet Daniel who wrote:

*I saw one like a human being (son of man) coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One…to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him…his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.*

In other words, in some mysterious way, the disappearance of Jesus was a claim having to do with this vision given to the prophet.

If you were a good Roman invited to this same meeting, you would hear this story differently, you would immediately think, “this is what happened to Julius Caesar and several others like Augustus, who, upon their deaths, were made into gods. They ascended into the heavens and are now stars in the heavens, looking down on us.”

You might turn to the friend who brought you and ask, “what kingdom did he rule and are his armies strong?”

This question is the right one actually; even if it will need to be turned on its head, it surely is the right one. It’s the “what difference did Jesus make?” question. It’s the relevance question.

It’s the same question the disciples ask Jesus when just before he disappears and in light of the Resurrection, they ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Surely all that has happened, your life, your teaching, your awful death and then, this shock of shocks, your resurrection, is for this! Right?

It’s the question we imply when we assume that now that they’re in a relationship with Christ through our baptism and by faith that everything will “work out in our lives, won’t it?”

Luke wants his readers, wants us, to ask these sorts of questions, wants us to first of all understand that we are right to ask them and right to expect a “yes” answer.

Yes, the world has changed with all that has happened and aligning ourselves with these changes, with this person will, indeed, make all the difference.

But here’s where Luke’s writing exposes his sleight of hand; he proposes this imagery which expects a certain answer but then has the men in white and Jesus himself say, but *how* that works out will be different than you think; in effect, “you’re looking in the wrong spot.”

It’s the sleight of hand that gets us wrestling with how Jesus is turning the meaning of these events on their heads.

Instead of the Resurrection solving all of humanity’s, *our* problems; the Ascension reveals that God wants to take our problems right into the heart of the divine life!

Instead of Daniel’s picture of the Messiah presenting captive kingdoms to God, Jesus draws close God bringing with him our human nature with all its messy variability.

When we say, as we will say in a minute “is seated at the right hand of the Father,” we recognize that Jesus has been accepted at the burning centre of the divine reality as the Risen Son of Man, that is the Risen Human One, bringing with him all our words and actions of rage and hate, all our words and actions of beauty and love;

When we say words like “in Christ,” we recognize that we have been brought, just as we are, where Christ is, at the heart of the divine life. Our humanity is not external to God; indeed it has become, in Christ, part of divinity!

This is why what would have expected immediate action, given the imagery of Jewish Messiah and of a divinized Caesar, cannot be immediate.

This is why Jesus says to the disciples, “the Kingdom is not yet being restored to Israel, the times and seasons are in the Father’s hands.”

This relationship between God and humanity is going to take time to develop, from both sides! God in Christ, is not humanity’s conqueror, but in, some sense, the conquered!

It’s like a parent who allows the interests of his growing children to change her/him as they grow. In some small way the interests of my adult children, their struggles, joys, successes and idiosyncrasies have changed the way I look a the world.

By taking in their sometimes surprising, sometimes wonderful, but sometimes disturbing, words, actions, attitudes and perspectives we inhabit not just one generation but theirs as well; because of love, we see the world through their eyes.

This, times infinity, is what it means for Christ’s humanity to inhabit the centre of the divine being and life; here’s where St. Augustine’s saying quoted at the beginning of this homily hits home, “this is the festival that confirms the profitableness of all the others,” precisely because this was always the goal; humanity living at the centre of God. Next week we discover the beautiful complement. If Ascension points to humanity living at the centre of God, Pentecost will insist that divinity can live in and through humanity.

We practice the Ascension of Christ when we reflect the patience and love it takes for God to integrate our humanness into the divine perspective; when instead of trying to bend others to our way of thinking, we become willing to allow our thinking to bend to theirs

One upshot is that we can live more realistically with each other! It is our patient kindness over time that will change us the most; we can let go, a bit (not totally, that’s realistic, right?) of our own agendas and listen to each other’s perspectives and struggles and joys.

We are, on other words, finally in this event, not meant to stare at the clouds or the stars, we are meant to open our eyes and hearts to the breadth and complexity of the mission before us; that’s why Jesus disappeared; so that we might see him here, in each other and in the suffering ones around us, just as he see us there, with God!