

Ascension of the Lord

26.05.2022
By Jonny Clark

Introduction

We read in the Gospel text for Ascension Day an exchange between Jesus and his disciples. We're told this conversation leads to their minds being opened to new ideas about who Jesus is and how they might understand their most sacred Hebrew Scriptures.

Following this opening of minds, the disciples are tasked with proclaiming "repentance and forgiveness" to all nations. No small feat. After this charge Jesus blesses them and is "carried up into heaven". The disciples return to Jerusalem "with great joy".

This text covers some big theological areas in just a few short verses: Christology, Pneumatology, Evangelisation, and even Eschatology. Possibly each area requires a basis of scriptural reflection broader than just these verses.

In the Gospels there is space given to the question askers and doubters, people like Peter and Thomas. This passage is not such a place. Jesus explains and minds are opened. It almost seems quite transactional. For most of us such opening of minds usually takes more than one conversation, especially the older we get.

Two gospels mention the Ascension, along with the book of Acts. In Mark's Gospel Jesus ascends to what in other Gospels is referred to as "the right hand of the Father". This phrase could be understood to mean complete dominion over all that exists.

All that is to say a lot is being covered here. I find myself longing to hear the actual conversation. What did he say that hadn't been said in the three years before his crucifixion? Did they accept this new information without any discussion, reasoning, clarifying, disagreeing? Would the ascension have created a vacuum in this new community? The central figure of their lives for the last three years, had been removed. What do they do now? Who is in charge? Conflict hides beneath the surface of most of our human interactions. There are differences of motive, differences of understanding, and we all have such vastly different personalities, with different hopes and ambitions. These differences are often magnified in a vacuum. How would the disciples have dealt with this?

Text

Luke 24:44-53

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and

the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Comment

In the Gospel reading for the Ascension of the Lord, we see Jesus, in a matter of a few lines, explain the logic of the entire Hebrew Bible and how it relates to him. He then “opened their minds to understand the scriptures”. A few verses later we see him bless his disciples, then he is taken up into heaven and his disciples return to Jerusalem “with great joy”. This is some turn around! A lot of explaining is done quite quickly and then, he is gone.

If I know anything in life, it is that understanding complexity is not something that can be arrived at hastily. Perhaps these verses are oversimplifying what may have been a longer conversation. It would have been harder for the Gospel writer to say something like: “Jesus’ words made sense but also challenged a lot of long held and long cherished beliefs. This challenge caused some disciples to vigorously debate what they had heard, some experienced flashing existential doubts about their faith, others passively acquiesced to Jesus’ teaching but didn’t want to admit that they were struggling to understand it all... but ultimately everyone decided to move forward on the basis of what Jesus had explained”. Maybe this summary is inaccurate and even flippant, but surely the Gospel account we read is at best a summary of the multitude of thoughts and exchanged words that followed Jesus’ reflection on his life, his vocation and the Hebrew Scriptures. After all, the very crucifixion of Jesus had been acquiesced to by many Jews living in Jerusalem (including Judas) who were disillusioned with Jesus’ Messianic vision. His vision of inclusion, rather than the violent overthrow of colonising outsiders and a restoration of the halcyon days of Davidic Empire, was grating to Jews longing for military victory.

So we read this passage aware that big theological moves are being made. Jesus is explaining that his life and ministry can be seen as an unfolding and fulfilling of much of what is in their Scriptures. This interpretation of “Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” was a radical departure. This must have caused some kind of internal and possibly external conflict.

After Jesus explains this new paradigm of understanding, he tells his hearers that “repentance and the forgiveness of sins” are to be proclaimed in all the nations. This reminds me of the missionary endeavours of Christian churches through the centuries. There is a critique of the history of the church since the third century which emphasises the tragic marriage of church growth and violent colonial conquest. Rather than intrinsically understanding beauty in indigenous cultures, missionary endeavour emanating from all of the major Christian confessional movements was frequently about colonising and subjugation. Even if we leave aside such violent episodes as the Crusades or the Inquisition, and instead look at the Synod of Whitby, Plymouth Rock, or a 20th century Billy Graham crusade, we are talking about a powerful movement imposing its faith on the receiving culture.

Perhaps this kind of colonising faith is the product of reading a passage like this one as a standalone set of simplistic orders. Yet the Commission of Jesus can’t be read as a simple “go and tell people to repent and then get forgiven”. Otherwise what would be the point of all the other things Jesus said, especially the Sermon on

the Mount, which for many in the early Church was the distillation of his teachings? The famous Sermon ends with a concern that people would worship Jesus saying “Lord Lord”, without following his teachings. The Anabaptist Menno Simmons berated Protestant clerics in 16th Century Holland: “O preachers, dear preachers, where is the power of the Gospel you preach?...Shame on you for the easygoing gospel and barren bread-breaking, you who have in so many years been unable to effect enough with your gospel and sacraments so as to remove your needy and distressed members from the streets, even though the Scripture plainly teaches... there shall be no beggars among you.”

This rebuke could be heard almost as a warning to anyone that would read today’s Gospel reading as a simplistic message about getting people’s souls or minds converted without real change in their actions, especially towards the poor.

Jesus’ expression of his identity and mission was categorically different from what First Century Jews expected of the Messianic figure. This conflict in expectation unfolds in many Gospel readings. In this passage we are spared any talk of dissonance. As we read this passage, however, perhaps we should reflect on the Jesus we want and the Jesus who is witnessed in the Gospels. We could also reflect on the disparity between the nonviolent teaching of Jesus and the violent spread of Christianity over the centuries. Maybe we should reflect on how we experience the presence of the Jesus that ascended. Do we live as if his teachings animate and indeed govern our daily lives, or as if he is absent from us, awaiting a meeting in the great beyond? This passage is about implicit conflict, both in the lives of his First Century followers, and in us as we gaze back on Christian history. Perhaps the point of reading a passage like this is to ground ourselves anew in the space of here and now, asking where Jesus is to us today. Is he with us or is he far away? Are his words in the Sermon on the Mount, the Rosetta Stone of our lives, or are his teachings closeted in some disused recess of our memories?

After Christendom by Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider. 2011 by Herald Press.
Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. J.C. Wenger. 1956 by Herald Press.

Response

Maybe this passage needs to leave us asking for more. What was this initial conversation with Jesus really like? Was there initial disagreement? Were there questions of clarification? Were there internal struggles to deal with dissonance between what Jesus was teaching and a lifetime of immersion in First Century Hebrew thought and faith? The Welsh singer-songwriter Martyn Joseph sang “If I don’t find out the search is not in vain...I treasure the questions...searching Sahara’s of sorrow...but the journey has brought me so much closer.”

Where is the ascended Jesus for you today? Is he present or is he absent?

If the Ascension is a theological statement about the present reign of Christ, how do you react to that now?

How do you cope with your faith not giving you all the answers you expected?

Prayer

God of the future, God of the now,
Open our hearts and our minds to the depth of your teachings,
That we may worship you with our actions as well as our words.
May our worship be a space of inclusion for all those you love
And may we be conscious that your Spirit is with us always
Wherever our wanderings take us.
Amen

Further Reading

Season: Easter

Themes: Justice