

“That You May Know” – Eph 1:15-23 – Ascension Sunday – June 1, 2014

On this Ascension Sunday we focus upon the ascension – the rising – of Jesus rising into heaven after visiting with His disciples following His rising from death. I must admit to being somewhat tempted to follow the usual Hollywood-like approach and focus on the Ascension event itself as do most who preach on these texts. After all, the Ascension is almost always presented as the kind of event that makes for good movies, or TV shows, in particular the kind that hold the threat of terror not too far in the background, the ‘Apocalypse Now (or at least Soon!)’ kind of show.

And yet there’s a huge problem with the “Star Wars” kind of approach to this event. That problem is our ever-increasing familiarity with outer space. Where the gospel authors had a somewhat limited view of our physical surroundings, we now find moon landings to be “old hat”, and space stations to be nothing new. We have watched – using TV signals echoed via satellites – the whole life cycle of NASA’s space shuttle, and continue to enjoy spectacular views of earth from space on various documentaries. And so we are not only rather blasé about Jesus rising heavenward in the Ascension event as Luke dramatically narrates it, we tend to be downright skeptical. And so I am drawn toward Paul’s rather limited and oblique reference to this event. Paul does not describe the event but instead in one verse (v.20) notes how “[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.”

We should not be too surprised that the Apostle Paul makes no direct reference to the Ascension event itself, since he is more concerned with what the event meant than with the details of how it happened, as we see in his letter to the Ephesians. He clearly targeted this letter to Gentile Christians, to people who had come to believe in Jesus but who did not come from a Jewish background. These Gentiles were considered unacceptable by many of the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea, and considered unacceptable by their very nature. Paul uses the standard ‘I give thanks for you’ section of his letter to directly address these new believers, and to outline both what he considers to be a challenge for them and him alike as well as a summary of what they need to know and understand.

It seems that part of the challenge or problem centered upon a lack of knowledge or tradition among the Gentile people about the faith into which they had recently cast their allegiance. In his opening thanksgiving for these new faithful Paul also offers a prayer, specifically that “God ... would give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” referring of course to Jesus. From this I think we can safely assume that many of these new Christians were practicing their faith with little or no understanding of what it was really all about. We can’t be too critical of them, however, because the Christian faith was at this time no more than a couple of generations old, at most. There hadn’t been a whole lot of time for a broad and deep understanding of the Christ events to have developed and been articulated. There was as yet no New Testament, no theological gatherings over coffee at the local seminary – indeed there was no seminary yet. The faith and the foundations of the faith were being sculpted in letters such as this one, and people of the day – especially those who didn’t come from the same Jewish faith into which Jesus was born and baptized – could be readily excused for not yet understanding fully the magnificent saving grace of God in the risen Jesus as Christ.

It also seems that those in the new Church who were of Jewish background considered themselves to be somehow more legitimate than the new Gentile converts through being born into the legacy offered by God to the descendants of Abraham because Paul takes great pains to convince the Gentile believers that they are also legitimate children of that promise, a promise sealed in Christ’s saving action, and confirmed in Christ’s being seated at

the right hand of God. Paul seems concerned that the people in the newly-developing church do not seem to fully comprehend or appreciate the significance of God's saving actions in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as the Christ.

Some of the same concerns still linger in the church of today. Newcomers and "old-timers" alike can often reveal that foundational issues of faith have either been missed or have been pushed aside by other beliefs and practices. In a bid to counter declining numbers and a sense of irrelevance to today's society many congregations have responded in one of two ways: on the one hand to become culturally trendy; and on the other hand to become moral enforcers.

The 'trendy' movement seeks to make the practice of worship familiar and entertaining, which in and of itself is not necessarily problematic – heaven knows that worship should be appealing and enjoyable! This approach only becomes a problem when the entertainment overwhelms the content or distorts the underlying message of grace, as for example when passionate "Jesus and me" emotionalism pushes aside God's involvement and God's glory, or when the incorporation of elements from other faith practices becomes so pervasive that the essence of Christian belief is lost. One might view the use of a Star Wars Sunday as an example.

At the other end of the spectrum the 'moral police' approach takes a defiant stand against society, erecting moats and castle walls to keep out perceived encroaching evils and people who would 'taint' the faith. These barriers are indeed effective, creating a greater and greater isolation of fewer and fewer faithful from the world at large. While the church often has a legitimate role in addressing evils in society such as genocide and child abuse, sadly too often this insular approach tends to move from actions against injustices to rabid defenses of often irrelevant social customs.

Against these kinds of challenges and issues in the faith that seemed to be arising even in the early church, Paul gently urged the faithful readers of his letter to recall what was really of foundational importance: "that you may know the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power." The power to which he refers of course is the power of God. While not diminishing the role and the importance of Christ, Paul over and over again in this letter reminds his readers of God's saving action, and mercy, and grace. "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus", Paul continues.

This emphasis on God is an important reminder to the church today. Not surprisingly, and with some justification, the church often puts a great focus on Jesus or on the Holy Spirit, and in doing so pushes God into the background. Succumbing to the pressures of political correctness in which the image of God as a "father figure" has been badly tarnished, the church often relegates God to the status of an aged and impotent kindly old grandfather who, having done what he could do in his prime, now merely watches over unfolding events with rheumy eyes and a gentle smile. We need to be reminded by Paul's words, and by the living Word of scripture, that it was God who "raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places." Moreover, it was God who made Christ "the head of all things for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

It is the power of God at work in Christ that redeems and reconciles us to God through Christ's death and resurrection. It is the power of God at work in the Holy Spirit promised by Christ that now guides and directs us and gives us access – fully forgiven – to God. We are Christians, and thus we are called by Christ to give all glory and honour to God.

How then do we respond? How then can we bring honour and glory to God? It is both simple and difficult at the same time. It is simple, in that we surrender ourselves to God in Christ's name; it is difficult, in that making that surrender is a constant ongoing struggle, trying to overcome our fears and our needs and our desires and our cravings to be in control. It is simple in that we are called to worship and offer praise to God; it is difficult in that we are often busy, and tired, and distracted, and sometimes wonder if God is listening to us or even if God is there. It is simple in that all we have to do is follow God's Word; it is difficult in that we don't often dig into the Word to read it, and when we do it is often confusing, or too challenging. It is simple, in that all we have to do is trust God; it is difficult, in that all we have to do is trust God, for we find placing that kind of trust leaves us feeling powerless.

Again, hear what the Apostle Paul said to the early faithful, and what he says to us today: "that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power." Hear the assurance of that hope. Savour the riches of his glorious inheritance. Feel the immeasurable greatness of his power ... not against you but for you in your belief. There are those who will argue that you cannot prove God's power or even God's existence; there are also those of faith who will testify to both, having felt the power of God's goodness help them to overcome their fears, help them to fend off evil, and help them to realize that they are loved. Many people of faith will also testify to the riches that God has delivered to them in response to prayer – not necessarily riches of wealth and fame but the more important riches of reconciliation with others, the joy of family and friends, the reassurance that they matter.

It is this power of God which we acknowledge and for which we give thanks, and offer all praise and worship, glory and honour to God, our Father and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Holy Spirit lives and dwells as one God, now and forever.