

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE APOSTLES' CREED -- 6.

The Reverend Canon John A. Hollister

**I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth:**

**And in Jesus Christ his only Son our
Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary: Suffered under Pon-
tius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried:
He descended into hell; The third day he rose
again from the dead: *He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father
Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge
the quick and the dead.***

**I believe in the Holy Ghost: The holy
Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints:
The Forgiveness of sins: The Resurrection of
the body: And the Life everlasting. Amen.**

“He ascended into heaven, ...”

The sixth segment or phrase of the Apostles' Creed deals with the event we call Christ's "Ascension" and remember on Ascension Thursday. Ascensiontide -- the period from Ascension Thursday until Pentecost (also called Whitsunday) -- is one of the shortest periods of the Church year but it celebrates one of the most important stages in the Church's origin.

This was the period in which the Apostles and disciples, numbering about 120 in all,¹ were gathered in "the upper room",² waiting in seclusion at Our Lord's direction³ and waiting for they

knew not precisely what. Christ told them that at the end of this period of waiting, they would “receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon [them]: and [they would] become witnesses unto [him] both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”⁴

What this waiting for power turned out to mean was the way the “Great Commission” was to be fulfilled: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”⁵ The Church has always understood this passage to be the charter of its missionary and evangelistic activity.

At the end of this period of waiting, the Holy Ghost⁶ descended upon the Apostles, filling them with the Spirit⁷ in a new and more complete fashion⁸ that fitted them to become Christ’s missionaries to the whole world, Jew and Gentile. It is this descent of the Holy Ghost that we call “Pentecost”, after the Jewish feast upon which it occurred, or in English, Whitsunday (“Whitesunday”). Anciently, the new members of the Church were baptized on Easter Even and then spent the week after time their baptisms in church, still wearing their white baptismal robes and studying the parts of Faith that were only taught to full members of the Church. Thus “White Sunday” was the day they “graduated” from their intense preparation course and changed back into ordinary street clothes.

These few days of retreat and meditation in preparation for the great day of Pentecost, which is itself the true birthday of the Church, may be likened to a rest in a bar of music. By itself it is, quite literally, nothing at all, but heard in context, it gives rhythm and meaning to everything that went before and that comes after it.

Christ’s Ascension, in which His physical body left this earth and was transferred to heaven, marks the end of the special phase of God’s relationship with humanity, the phase of His physi-

cal presence here on Earth, that began with the Incarnation, that is, with Christ's birth into a human body as a human baby. Following that 33-year phase comes the period from the Ascension on to Christ's Second (and last) Coming,⁹ the period in which we are currently living.

This has lasted two thousand years thus far and may well last many, many thousands of years yet. During this time, God's chosen way of making Himself present in the world is through the action of the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, that is, through the Holy Ghost,¹⁰ Who in turn usually acts through the means Christ Himself chose to mediate salvation to humanity, which is His Body,¹¹ which is the Church.

“... And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty ...”

In ancient Middle and Near Eastern monarchies, the king or emperor would hold formal receptions in his audience hall, seated upon his throne. To show his power and magnificence, his high officers of state, military commanders, and counselors would be stationed in a line or fan on each side of him. Almost everyone had to stand in the presence of the sovereign; only the very highest dignitaries would sometimes be given the extraordinary privilege of sitting in the monarch's presence.¹²

These officers and counselors would be arranged in order of their precedence, with the most prized positions being those closest to the person of the king.¹³ Also, among the positions of equal distance from the king's person, those on his right side took precedence over those on his left. Thus the Old Testament said, in a passage the Church understands as a foretelling of the Messiah (who was at the time of that writing still to come but who for us has already come) “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.”¹⁴

Thus when the Creed affirms that Christ in heaven *sits* at the *right hand* of God the Father, it repeats an image Christ Himself used to describe His divine status¹⁵ and which is drawn from

the well-known court protocol of the day: “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power”¹⁶ and “[H]e was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”.¹⁷ This expresses Christ’s exalted status, placing it in human terms equal in rank and next in seniority to that of the Father. Compare this image enshrined in the Creed with the vision St. Stephen had as he was dying at the hands of the riotous mob that Saul of Tarsus had stirred up to murder him:

But he [Stephen], being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.¹⁸

That is, to confirm to the dying Stephen that the Jesus Christ in whose service he was giving his life was, indeed, the Son of God and Himself God, Stephen was shown Christ in heaven, standing at the right hand of God.

In the same way, the great importance of the four and twenty elders is shown by the position they are given in St. John’s great vision of the throne of God: “[B]ehold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. ... And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.”¹⁹ Thus when the Creed tells us that Christ “sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty”, it is telling us, as Christ told the High Priest and St. Stephen’s dying vision confirmed, that we have truly put our faith in the divinity of Christ.

¹ Acts of the Apostles 1:15.

² *Ibid.*, 1:13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, 1:4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:8 (KJV).

⁵ St. Matthew 28:19-20 (KJV).

⁶ “Ghost”, as we have said before, is nothing more than an obsolescent word for “spirit”. Thus “Holy Ghost” and “Holy Spirit” mean precisely the same thing;

“Holy Ghost” just has a more traditional sound to it. Also, “spirit” can have several meanings but when we refer to the Holy Ghost there is no question that we mean the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity, also known as “the Comforter” (*i.e.*, “the Strengthener”).

⁷ See note 6 above.

⁸ Acts 2:1-11.

⁹ St. Matthew 24:29-31 and 25:31-46; St. Mark 13:24-27; Revelation 1:7.

¹⁰ See, *e.g.*, St. John 14:16-18 and 14:26; Romans 8:14; 1 Corinthians 12:7.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:27.

¹² This point of protocol survived, *e.g.*, down to and even after the time of the “Sun King”, Louis XIV, in the French court at Versailles. On this same principle, the great importance of the four and twenty elders in St. John’s vision is shown by their being seated around God’s throne, Revelation 4:4.

¹³ This principle also pertains in private social gatherings. See, *e.g.*, St. Luke 14:7-11.

¹⁴ Psalm 110:1 (MCV).

¹⁵ “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power,” St. Matthew 26:64b; *cf.* “[H]e was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God”, St. Mark 16:19.

¹⁶ St. Matthew 26:64b (KJV).

¹⁷ St. Mark 16:19 (KJV).

¹⁸ Acts 7:55-56.

¹⁹ Revelation 4:2-4.