

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Sunday after Ascension Day¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“... In that day shall the branch of the LORD be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: When the LORD shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning. And the LORD will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defence. And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews.⁴

“... Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

“For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer

both gifts and sacrifices for sins: Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. As he saith **[SETH]** also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec **[mell-KIZZ-uh-deck]**. Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him; Called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec **[mell-KIZZ-uh-deck]**.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the first Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: “And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Some of you know that my absolute favorite day of the entire Christian year is Ascension Day, which we celebrated this past Thursday, forty days after Easter. And some of you have heard me preach about those depictions of our Lord’s Ascension where you see just His feet—His nail-scarred feet—

It is ended, but yet at the same time it is unending. In fact, you could make the same observation about the term “suffering” which was substituted in the text for “work”, for although on the one hand, His own corporeal suffering on earth is ended, yet on the other hand, His Body on earth, His Church, continues to suffer persecution and martyrdom, and in a very real and true sense, He is the One suffering in his members. He is the one that is cast out and reviled and oppressed and abused and even killed. He has told us Himself, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” Again, it is both/and, rather than either/or.

For that is the real point of the Ascension, that Christ breaks down that division between what’s going on in heaven and what’s going on in earth. Just as in His Incarnation He (as it were) brings down heaven into earth, so in His Ascension, He brings earth up into heaven. So that’s why we don’t have to stand there gazing up to try to see him, squinting and straining to pick Him out way up there, for we can still see Him and hear Him and hold Him and even taste Him right here, right before us on this very earth.

—oo0oo—

The Rev’d Paul Sterne⁶
May 20, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the propers for Holy Communion on the Sunday after Ascension Day, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 4:2-end (KJV).

⁴ Hebrews 4:14—5:10 (KJV).

⁵ Acts 1:10-11 (KJV).

⁶ Assisting Priest, The Pro-Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.

going up into the clouds. And some of you know, yea, even have seen, that recently at St. Theodore’s Chapel we have had our own such depiction painted by a student artist and installed on the ceiling over our altar. I suppose you could say that it literally is a little over the top. And I don’t necessarily expect it to go down in art history next to the Sistine Chapel, but it is pretty cool to have Jesus ascending into heaven right through our ceiling.

(And since we don’t have an overhead projector in here the church, I printed out a photo of it that you can check out in the narthex after Mass.) Now, when I was planning it with the artist, I told her that when you look at it, I want you not to be able to tell whether he is a-goin’ or a-comin’, because of the admonition of the angels to the men of Galilee, that just as He went up, so will He come back in like manner. You don’t really know whether it’s the Ascension or the Second Coming—so you had better be ready. What’s more, our artist’s own personal touch to communicate that duality was to have one foot tilted down and the other tilted up, so that it conveys both at the same time.

But there was something else that I had the artist do, and that was to feature prominently the nail wounds in our Lord’s feet—it even has the rays of heaven streaming down through the nail prints. And that is because when He ascends into heaven, He does so to present His perfect sacrifice eternally before the throne of his Father. For what we don’t see on the other side of those clouds is the rest of Him, the other nail-prints in His hands (with which He had blessed the disciples just before He ascended), stretched out in the *orans* position of a priest at prayer, interceding His sacrifice on our behalf to the Father, and showing Him what He had done for us.

We are singing one of the most theologically rich hymns of the Anglican tradition today, “Alleluia! sing to Jesus”, which most people don’t realize was composed specifically for the Ascension—so actually pay attention to the words while you are

singing it, and maybe you will pick that up. His role as intercessor is throughout the hymn, and we can almost see Him standing in prayer for us: “Thou within the veil hast entered, Robed in flesh our great High Priest: Thou on earth both Priest and Victim In the Eucharistic feast.” He has entered into the true tabernacle, not made with hands, and presents His one perfect sacrifice, of which our Eucharist is the earthly partaking.

After we installed the Ascension painting in the chapel, and I was explaining about Him a-comin’ or a-goin’, one of my students pointed out a third aspect, that the altar is the footstool of God, so it may be that He is just a-settin’ around right there. He hasn’t left us by ascending into heaven; He has just become present in a different manner. His very last words that St. Matthew records are His promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”—that’s in the hymn too, so watch for it.

Though His Body ascends into heaven, His Body is still on earth. After we extinguish the paschal candle on Ascension Day, our focus returns to the sanctuary lamp, His sacramental presence, which is just as real as His corporeal presence. One other surprise about the feet on the ceiling is that when I am celebrating Mass at the chapel, I can see Him reflected down into the Communion silver. So yes, He’s up there, but He is also right here as well.

The Christian faith is filled with paradoxes that we have to hold together in union: God is both three and one; Christ is both God and man; the Body of Christ is both in heaven and on earth, there is no dichotomy. As the hymn says, He is both the priest and the victim in the Eucharistic feast.

But here is one more paradox, and one more hymn for the Ascension, in fact, my own personal favourite Ascension-tide hymn. (Incidentally, my landlady will be so glad when Ascension-tide is over, because it means I won’t be playing this hymn seventeen times a day.) Now, you may not be familiar

with it, because it is one of those completely over-the-top Victorian hymns (with a tune composed by Arthur Seymour Sullivan, as in “Gilbert and Sullivan”) which have fallen out of favour over the years. But if you’re going to sing an over-the-top hymn, what better time than when Jesus goes over the top?

So, our last hymn today is called “Golden Harps are Sounding”, and I’ll try to restrain myself from doing a little jig as we go down the aisle. Now, like with so many hymns in our hymnal, I noticed that after the author’s name, it has a little “*alt*” in italics, which means that at some point, the compilers of this or some previous hymnal thought that the text needed a little cleaning up, so they decided to alter it. Sometimes when you look at the original text, it’s obvious why a little alteration would be felicitous, but very often the reasoning for the change is a bit of a mystery, at least to me.

Usually (not always, but usually), they should have just stuck with the way the author wrote it. So, in looking at “Golden Harps are Sounding” in the previous hymnal, we see that the original refrain read “All his *work* is ended”, whereas in the 1940, it has been altered to “All his *suffering* ended”. “All his work is ended”; “All his suffering ended.” Not a huge alteration, and to give the editors the benefit of the doubt, I suppose they were making the point that Jesus continues to work in and through His Church, and that is certainly true.

So in one sense, no, His work is not ended; but in another sense, yes it is. It’s another one of those paradoxes. His great work, His sacrifice on the cross on our behalf, is perfect, it’s complete, it lacks nothing whatsoever, and is sufficient for all time, which undoubtedly was the author’s original point. Yet on the other hand, His work on the Cross is still ongoing, it is always a present reality for us. He completed it on the cross as Man, but yet He carries it in His own resurrected flesh into heaven to present it, to plead it for all eternity, because, as God, He is outside of time.