

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Sunday after Ascension Day¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.³

“And it shall be, when thou art come in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance, and possessest it, and dwellest therein; That thou shalt take of the first of all the fruit of the earth, which thou shalt bring of thy land that the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt put it in a basket, and shalt go unto the place which the LORD thy God shall choose to place his name there. And thou shalt go unto the priest that shall be in those days, and say unto him, I profess this day unto the LORD thy God, that I am come unto the country which the LORD sware unto our fathers for to give us. And the priest shall take the basket out of thine hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD thy God. And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God, A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous: And the Egyptians evil entreated us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage: And when we cried unto the LORD God of our fathers, the LORD heard our voice, and looked on our affliction, and our labour, and our oppression: And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders: And he hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land, which thou, O LORD, hast given me. And thou shalt set it before the LORD thy God, and worship before the LORD thy God: And thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the LORD thy God hath given unto thee, and unto thine house, thou, and the Levite, and the stranger that is among you.

“When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and hast given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled; Then thou shalt say before the LORD thy God, I have brought away the hallowed things out of mine house, and also have given them unto the Levite, and unto the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all thy commandments which thou hast commanded me: I have not transgressed thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them. I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I taken away ought thereof for any unclean use, nor given ought thereof for the dead: but I have hearkened to the voice of the LORD my God, and have done according to all that thou hast commanded me. Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel, and the land which thou hast given us, as thou swarest unto our fathers, a land that floweth with milk and honey.

“This day the LORD thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: thou shalt therefore keep and do them with all thine heart, and with all thy soul. Thou hast avouched the LORD this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice: And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken.”

Or,

Here beginneth the sixty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁴

“Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth

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

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 38 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ Deuteronomy 26:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Isaiah 64:1-end (KJV).

⁵ St. John 14:1-14 (KJV).

⁶ Ephesians 1:3-end (KJV).

⁷ Acts 1:10-11 (KJV).

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the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

“Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O LORD? wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou

goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him. Philip saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it."

Or,

Here beginneth the third Verse of the first Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.⁶

"... Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispen-

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.

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.

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The Rev'd Paul Sterne⁸
May 20, 2012

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 Ascensiontide 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.

sation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

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 hea-

ven.”⁷ 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—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.