

Ascension Day

21 May 2020 - Klippies Kritzinger

Dear friends

We have reached Day 40 of the Easter season, celebrated as the Feast of the Ascension, in a country and a world beset by storms and dangers. There is growing frustration and suffering due to the effect of the lockdown on the economy. There is confusion and uncertainty on whether it is safe for schools to reopen. As the lockdown gets lifted step by step to try and salvage our struggling economy, the threat of a steep increase in covid-19 infections looms large, creating more anxiety. Perhaps there is also some “compassion fatigue” creeping into the lives of the team working in your shelter. All of this is understandable; we are living in extraordinary and very challenging times.

What does the ascension of Christ to heaven mean in a situation like this? Is it not an irrelevant or unnecessary appendix to the “real” events of salvation, namely the cross and resurrection? Does it make any sense in a society that hears the words “ascended into heaven” as referring to some kind of “primitive” space travel? Ascension is probably the most misunderstood and ignored event in the life and work of the Lord Jesus. There are so many aspects to it, that I limit myself to only the ascended Christ as Lord and King.

The New Testament uses amazing expressions to describe the ascension of the Lord Jesus and its effect: “seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mk 15:62); “All authority in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:19); “seated at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph 1:20f); “ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things” (Eph 4:10); “the name above every name” (Phil 2:9); “blessing and honour and glory might, forever and ever” (Rev 5:13).

This sounds wonderful; almost too good to be true. But doesn't power corrupt? And doesn't absolute power corrupt absolutely? Did Jesus change when he was lifted up from this suffering earth and transported into glory? The good news of Ascension is that he didn't change; that he is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8); that the history of the world is in the nail-pierced hands of the Man of Nazareth: the One who healed the lame; touched the lepers; ate with tax-collectors, outcasts and Samaritans; blessed the little children; cried at his friend Lazarus's grave; called out religious hypocrites; sacrificed himself for the life of the world.

But now his healing, liberating and empowering presence is available everywhere, to everyone; not only in Palestine. Imagine the long queues we would have to stand in to have a brief personal conversation with the Lord Jesus if he had stayed on earth! Imagine how he would have to be flown from one continent to the other to meet his followers! He told Mariam of Magdala: “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (Jn 20:17). It seems she wanted to “claim” him for herself, as she was clinging to his feet. So he lifts her up and sends her out on mission. But he does imply that she *will* be able to hold on to him once he *has* ascended to the Father! The outpouring of the Holy Spirit makes the personal presence of the glorified Jesus available and real to each one of us, so that we can have a personal and intimate relationship with him every day. He has not been corrupted by his position of

power and glory. Instead, he has maximised and multiplied his serving, liberating presence to “fill all things” everywhere.

There is an “exchange” movement that takes place: The Lord Jesus is “taken up” in glory while the Holy Spirit is “sent down” to make him present with us and in us. And the preferential option that Jesus exercised for the excluded, ignored and oppressed people in Palestine still drives his involvement in our broken world. His transforming personal presence is multiplied billions of times as he comes to live within each one of us by his Spirit and as he reaches out to others through us. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection would never have had a worldwide impact if he wasn’t “lifted up” away from us physically so that the Holy Spirit could come to fill us and make us continue his ministry.

As the lockdown gets lifted bit by bit and as the covid-19 pandemic accelerates in our country, may you experience the presence of the glorified and ascended Lord in a very real way, so that you may be empowered to continue his work of care and transformation.

Prayer

Eternal God, creator of the universe

Thank you for remaining faithful to the world you made

For raising our crucified and risen Messiah to yourself

To share your throne, seated at your right hand

For pouring out your Spirit on all flesh.

Give us his servant heart, mind and hands by your Spirit

That we will never be corrupted by power or privilege

but like him remain consistently committed to your liberating mission

for the coming of your Reign and the glory of your name.