

## **Homily—Convocation Eucharist 2008**

Lections: *Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53.*

On the front cover of today's leaflet, you will see Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the Ascension of our Lord from his series of illustrations of Christ's Passion and Resurrection. In many ways it is a classic representation of the scene. Two little feet hang down below a big puffy cloud—that's Jesus looking a bit like the space shuttle taking off. The disciples kneel or stand around looking up mournfully, because Jesus is leaving them. And perhaps we feel and share some of those emotions today as we mark the end of studies accomplished, degrees and diplomas achieved, and the question marks of new ministry or further discernment. These times of parting are necessary for the new to begin, for hidden possibilities to unfold.

On the rear cover of the leaflet you will find a reproduction of Giotto's fresco from the chapel of St Francis in Assisi. Wet weather and time have lifted off the plaster from the lower part of the fresco, so we can't actually see what the disciples are doing—probably they are just as confused and muddled as the Church seems to be today. But the upper portion of Giotto's fresco gives us the other classic artistic representation of Christ's Ascension. Here we see the scene from another perspective, a more heavenly perspective. Giotto shows us all of Jesus except his feet, his hands still outstretched to bless, as he approaches the three circles that represent the Holy Trinity.

Giotto paints the scene this strange way because he is trying to help us understand something terribly important for us and for the Church. You see, Jesus was never 'outside' the Holy Trinity—the Incarnate One who walked among us here on earth in the power of the Spirit was always God, was always the second person of the Trinity, was always the Divine Son creating and refashioning the world in accord with God's eternal will. So in one sense, Giotto's painting seems to have it wrong—because he is already part of the Holy Trinity, Jesus can't be separated from it and return to it. But what I think Giotto wants to hold us to is a deeper reality. It's the human body of Jesus, yes, the risen and glorious body, but still the human body of Jesus Christ, that is being drawn up and into the innermost circles of the life of God. That dear body so like the gardener of Eden that Mary Magdalene longed to clasp and hold; that strong chest with its living beating heart of love that John laid his head on at the last Supper; those bruised knees kneeling with towel and water to wash his friends' feet, knees already bent as in Gethsemane into a curve of congruence with the divine will; those nail-torn hands that wrote in the dirt as the violent crowd dropped their stones and slunk away from the woman taken in adultery; those skilled workman's fingers that made mud and touched the eyes of the blind man; those all-seeing eyes that recognized the lame man who had laid in desperation and despair for thirty-eight years beside the healing waters; those pierced feet that danced at the wedding in Cana drunk with new wine; those wiry strong limbs like a gnarled and twisted grapevine full of life and sap that walked the length and breadth of Israel—that body is the Beloved Body that today is drawn into the heart of the life of God where it came from and where it most properly belongs.

But of course, it's more than that—because that Beloved Body, the Body of Jesus Christ, is also us. And so the Ascension changes completely the meaning of our lives and bodies. The human body is no longer something to be rejected and despised as it is in many religions. The human body, our bodies baptized into the death and life of Christ, are already inside the life of God—we are already the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Our pain, our suffering, our paralysis, our hunger and thirst, our temptation, our desire, our passions, our gentleness, our gesture of love or concern—all are inside the life of God full of longing and potential to be transformed into the working body of Christ, the body of Love that does the works of love. Every conversation we have, every casual meeting on the street, every relationship we're in, every caress or touch, already is inside the life of God and is the place where our bodies are called to become the life of God enfleshed, touching and holding and healing. The Ascension is not simply about Jesus going to

heaven—it is about our bodies and lives being drawn totally and fully with Jesus into the life and will of God. And in this, the Ascension tells us what is our ultimate and only calling.

Luke's text suggests several ways in which we experience the difference the Ascension makes for us who follow Jesus.

First, Luke tells us it makes a difference to how we understand the Bible. From now on only seven questions really matter as we seek to interpret the scriptures. First and foremost—what are the words Jesus spoke while he was still with us and how do they become our measure of meaning? Secondly, how do the scriptures help us understand what it means to take up our cross and share in the sufferings of Christ, God's anointed One? Thirdly, how do they help us understand and recognize the risen life of Christ at work among us and in the world? Fourthly, how do the scriptures help us to understand how to turn our lives completely toward God and how to help others do that—in other words to live in *teshuvah*, or repentance, and not in guilt and shame? Fifthly, how do the scriptures show us God's justice and mercy so that we can truly forgive as God forgives and give birth to trust and hope? Sixthly, what will the proclamation of the good news in Jesus Christ have to look like and sound like if it is to be heard and welcomed in every nation and every culture on earth? Finally, what does it mean for us to become the living evidence of this new way of hearing and sharing the meaning of the scriptures?

Secondly, Luke tells us that the Ascension transforms our prayers and our worship. Our life of prayer, our ongoing conversation with God, is not a relationship with some obscure power or force way out in the stratosphere, nor is it an endless despairing knocking on the door of some arbitrary unjust tyrant or judge. In being drawn inside the life of God with Jesus, we are already inside the household of the Trinity—our needs are known as we speak them, our longings and our hopes, our pain and fear and hunger, and our need for healing and wholeness. All these are already known by God in Jesus Christ, and not known as something strange or foreign to the perfect life of God, but understood through the flesh of Jesus' body which knew hunger and pain and fear, and even the grief of death and separation. Our prayers are already inside God, and conversely, our worship is a living out and manifestation of the inner life of God. We celebrate and praise God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the eternal work of creating, redeeming and sanctifying, we bless and we give thanks, we gather around the scriptures to meet and hear the True and Living Word, Jesus Christ, and we share the meal around his Holy Table in his Presence as a sign that one day all creation will be gathered in joy and justice at God's eternal banquet. But because we know the life of the Holy Trinity from inside, our worship is also our call to recreate and transform the unjust structures of human society, to pour out the endless love of the Triune God in respect and dignity for all people and all our relatives in God's creation.

Thirdly, Luke tells us that the Ascension is both our call to mission and God's promise to be with us and empower us for that mission. Christ's body is now both heavenly and earthly, extended through eternity and time, and if we are inside the life of God with Christ, we are also. as Church. his Body sent here to continue living out the life of God as Christ has shown us. As Christ was filled with the life of the Holy Spirit, God promises that we too will know and be filled with that Spirit baptism. And that Spirit is not something that sets us apart as privileged and special, in a holiness marked only by clean hands and mystic throes of ecstasy. No, the Spirit of God that will be poured out on us is the Spirit that will drive us, like the judges and prophets of old, out into the violence and idolatry of the world. It is a Spirit that breathes new life, that dirties its hands in the mud of risk and creates new possibilities, it is a Spirit that clears our blindness and enables us to see suffering and pain, to connect with longing for God and God's kingdom and walk with it on the way, to reach out to exclusion and rejection with the wide arms of Christ on the cross. It is a Spirit that proclaims the new day of the Lord, and frees prisoners and captives, a Spirit that finds the lost and beaten and abused and invites them into community and trust. Because as we with the ascended Christ are drawn into the heart of the life of God, we are drawn more and more deeply into God's mission, and as we are drawn more deeply into that mission, the more God's Spirit overflows

into our hearts with faithfulness, and hope, and most of all, with love. When Jesus Christ ascends to heaven it is not to escape from us and from the messiness of human existence—it is so that in us God can be more and more present with the Spirit’s power until that One Beautiful Body borne by Mary in her womb extends throughout all humanity and becomes the womb in which the new Creation is nurtured and formed from the messiness and chaos, from violence and war, from illusion and deception, into God’s kingdom of light and life and mercy and joy and peace.

To be drawn with the body of Jesus into life of God—Luke tells us it changes the way we read the Bible, it changes the way we pray and worship, and it changes our purpose and gives us Spirit-power to be fully part of God’s mission. These are the things Jesus promises his friends as they stand together, and then “as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

One more Ascension Day promise—perhaps the most important of all. Christ will return when the mission is complete, and all things have been restored. Jesus Christ who is “seated ... at God’s right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” will return to utter God’s final judgment on it all. It’s very popular among certain types of preachers of God’s judgement to remind us of all our failures and our guilt and shame—our missed acts of love, our betrayals, our broken marriages, our alienated colleagues and children and friends, our little dishonesties and lies, our temptations and our addictions. Other preachers of judgement like to point out all the different types of wicked people who are going to experience God’s wrath and judgement for their bad behaviour and immorality, a sort of telephone book of hell. We know those preachers and we tremble at what we know about the hollow and shabby truth of our own lives.

But Luke tells us something totally different about the last judgement, when Jesus will return from heaven in power and majesty and glory. Then indeed we will behold him, not as we saw him when we nailed him to the cross and spit on him and pierced his side, not even as we saw him in these brief Easter weeks, his risen body transfigured and mysterious among us on the road, or breaking the bread, or at the seaside, or in the upper room. No, in that moment we will see him as he truly is, true God and truest Human. Then, Luke tells us, he will return and we see him come again in the way we saw him go into heaven.

Look again at Giotto’s painting. There he is, our risen and ascended Lord, returning to judge the earth, and he is indeed as he was when he ascended into heaven. His arms are stretched out, no longer pinned by our nails to the cross, but lifted in blessing: blessing for us, and blessing for the universe, blessing for all that is, and all that has been and ever shall be. Because in the Ascension Christ too longs for us and draws us with unending cords of love into the inner life of God, so that our bodies may be made one with his body, and that our loves may be made one with his loves, and that we may know in all the power of the Spirit God’s will from before all time. Luke promises us that the Ascension is a portrait of God’s judgement. And today and forever, there is only one judgement in Jesus Christ. Look again—those are our Lord’s hands uplifted in blessing for you and for me, for all God’s creatures, our relations here on earth; in blessing pouring grace into our bodies, into our prayers, into our worship; in blessing as we read the ancient words of the scriptures and find in them new life for today; in blessing as we share the good news that the One we killed is alive again, that we can turn toward God and live beyond our blighted and selfish past. In the Ascension we know God’s greatest promise—there is only One True Word, Jesus Christ, the Word of God before all, and in all and through all. And in those lifted hands of blessing we know that the One True Word of the Eternal Father in Jesus Christ the Son, with all the passion of the Holy Spirit is: “Yes.” “Yes.” And again, “Yes.”