

Ascension Day 2020

Saint Luke is the author of both of our readings today. The Gospel account gives us the story of Jesus, 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up into heaven'. The Acts of the Apostles is what follows next: what happens after the ascension, as the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' disciples.

And that narrative of the Gospel is important: it ends with Jesus blessing the disciples and going up into heaven. It began with Jesus coming down from heaven, being incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and made man. The ascension sees Jesus return to heaven.

So what is the point of his years on earth, a mere blink in eternity's span?

This is where we need to go back to the beginning beyond the beginning of Luke's gospel, back to the beginning of the bigger story,

the creation of all things. God makes humankind in his image, says Genesis, 'in the image of God he created them'. In the New Testament, in Colossians, we read that 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.'

When we talk about Jesus' incarnation, his being born as one of us, we often think of it as him becoming like us. But if we look back to Genesis and to creation, we might instead say that we were made to be like him. If he is the image of God, very God of very God, then for us to be made in the image of God means being made to be like Jesus.

Now, we know that the image of God in humanity soon gets distorted. To be like Jesus is to enjoy perfect relationship with God the Father. And human sin and disobedience soon reaches for the forbidden fruit of self-determination and the pride that thinks we can go it alone. We deny God's desire for relationship because we think

we don't need him; we think we can be gods by ourselves.

As a result, the divine image is marred, and the relationship with God broken. Humanity becomes estranged from its Creator, and, cut off from the source of all life, becomes subject to death. God's desire for friendship with his creatures is denied by human sin.

The story of the Bible is the story of God's desire to bring us back home. He gives the Law, so that the people may live in the holiness and friendship that reflect his character. But the people persist in sin. He sends the prophets, to call his people back to him, reminding them of his love and steadfastness, of the life he longs for them to live. But the prophets they don't ignore, they kill.

Then he sends his Son. And this is where Luke's story begins. Christ, who is the very image of God, is born as a human being. The Son of God who enjoys perfect relationship with the Father in the unity of the Trinity takes on human flesh, lives as one of us, in order to bring us back to God. He shows us what divine life looks like in human flesh: it is life that forgives, that includes, that welcomes, that blesses, that heals and makes new.

It is life that makes mercy real in our dealings with others; that reconciles in words of freedom and acts of love.

It is life so truthful that those in power can't stand it; life so peace-filled that it threatens those who rely on violence and domination to secure what passes for peace.

The life of Jesus is what friendship with God looks like in a human life. But Jesus did not just come to show us how to live, a moral exemplar

whose words and actions inspire us to follow him.

He came because it was the only way to get us back. Despite all our best efforts, our attempts at holiness, our sacrifices and good deeds, we remained estranged from God, homesick for the relationship for which we were made.

So Jesus comes to do what we couldn't. He takes on our human nature, this being that sin prevents from reaching its full potential and that death robs of its true home, and he restores it. Where death once cut us off from eternal happiness with God, Jesus dies and rises again to show us that death no longer has such final power. When Jesus rises from the dead, he restores us to life, too.

And then he ascends into heaven. And he ascends because this is where he belongs: in heaven, in the perfect love of the Trinity. And because he has taken on our human flesh, this

is where we belong, too: he raises our humanity to the heights of heaven; he brings us home.

That's where Luke's first book, his Gospel, comes to an end. And it is our end too that Luke describes, our journey with Christ back to the Father's heart. But there is a whole other book to follow: the Acts of the Apostles, which is the story of Christ acting through his Church. 'You will be my witnesses', he says to the disciples just before he ascends. 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

It is tempting to stand looking up to heaven, peering after a Saviour now absent from the earth, hoping that if perhaps we plead hard enough he might come back in human form and save us from the pain of a society we don't know how to fix, from the fear that we are all alone.

We find ourselves crying out

Where are you? Why do you let this happen? Do something!

Through the gift of the Spirit, the disciples discovered that Christ was still with them.

Luke's Gospel tells the story of Christ's life from incarnation to ascension.

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Christ's life, through the Spirit, in the Church.

And that is a story that continues, that draws us in.

The apostles discovered Christ's power at work in them: power to heal, to preach, to reconcile, to bless, to draw people together into friendship even when they can't meet in person, with each other and with God.

This is the life the world needs; this is the life for which we are made. 'You are my witnesses', says Jesus. This is the life he calls us to live.