

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Ascension Day
May 10, 2018
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The human life of the Son of God is divided between His Nativity and His return in judgment at the end of time. The two parts of His life are *unequal* in terms of chronological time. The first part is short: thirty-three years by most estimates. The *second* part, which is the Heavenly Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is already past 2000 years and counting! The dividing line between these two parts is the Ascension.

All year long in the Gospels heard at Mass we have the presentation of Our Lord's earthly ministry. We have His parables and other teachings we know and love. Above all, there is the recounting of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. But the Gospels close off before, or just give a hint of, the Ascension.

The devotional lives of Christ we have read and love do the same thing. They stop short of the Ascension. Some even stop short of the Resurrection! Broadway and Hollywood also do that. If their treatment isn't blasphemous it is still incomplete. Ending with the Crucifixion, they sometimes provide a sequel which is a concoction of hazy and diaphanous smoke and mirrors.

Although the evangelists focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus and His Death and Resurrection, the fact is that for 2000 years it has been the *Ascended Christ* with Whom we have to do. The One we encounter in Word and Sacrament and prayer, and in the hearts of faithful people, is the Lord Who comes to us out of the whole length of His life in Heaven. This means we must not be sidetracked by our reading of and meditating upon the gospels. We love our thoughts about Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth, and the itinerant preacher giving insights into Divine revelation from the hillsides of Galilee. But ever since Ascension Day Christians know the principles and powers at work in that itinerant preacher are the operative forces which govern the whole universe. In today's Gospel the Lord says "All power in Heaven and on earth has been given to Me." And one of the Ascension Day prayers says we must "seek Him in His glory."

All this means the Ascension is not a piece of frosting on the cake, which can do just as well without the fancy icing! Nor is the Ascension a relic of the pre-scientific age, when, deprived of precision instruments like the Hubble Telescope,

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our Christian ancestors had an earthbound view of the universe. Do not mock the portrayals of medieval artists when they show kneeling apostles separated from our Lord by a barrier of fleecy cloud. That cloud was always more than a stray vapor blocking the view! It served notice a barrier of mystery makes it impossible for the naked eye to follow the further stages of the Ascended Christ. That sight will require the eye of faith and the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit. Those medieval painters knew much we have forgotten.

But the eye of faith *does* see. Otherwise, Ascension Day would be a time of mourning, not joy. Christians would be known as a society in sorrow, widowed for 2000 years by the loss of a Saviour as gracious as Jesus. Instead, the Ascension affirms a human nature like ours, and *representing* ours, has penetrated behind the last barrier. It has crossed the last threshold separating human and divine. And since the Lord Jesus said we are one with Him in a way of His devising, not ours, we can have now a taste of the Heavenly realm which is to be ours.

So we rejoice. The Ascended Christ is not lost to us. You do not have to book a flight to Tel Aviv on *El Al* to see Him! Where the Ascended Glorified Christ is with His people, *that place is Holy Land*. It is not for us to be concerned about such earth-bound concerns as whether Heaven is “up” and where Jesus and we may be “going”. The good news is that by His provision we are to be with Jesus, provided we love Him and follow Him as Lord.

The writer of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* sums it all up this way: “We can claim a great high priest, and one who passed right up through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.” Alleluia!