

Goodness. ... here it will be to ask for the grace to choose what is more for the glory of his Divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul. (*Sp Exx151-2*)

Ignatius offers for meditation no less than 13 appearances of the Lord after the Resurrection, including one to Paul which would have taken place *after* the Ascension. He insists that it is the Ascension that should be the final mystery of the whole retreat to be contemplated- the climax of the whole movement of Christ that brings him to the divine throne before which he stood repeatedly seeking God's will for his life.

I imagine Ignatius must have seen depicted in this image of Christ a process, a dynamic by which human beings could allow order to be drawn out of the chaos of their lives. He understood that the only way to unleash the transformative power of the Kingdom was not merely by assent to a purported state of affairs but by ***the deepest possible imaginative exploration of what it means to live in the world where Jesus is King***. For the key to engaging with the mystery of the Kingdom is, for Ignatius, as for the Spinner of parables Himself, the human imagination.

For St. Ignatius, a focused *imaginative* effort to contemplate the world under the aspect of the Kingdom of Christ and to discern in depth the difference that this truth makes: i.e. that it calls *me* to become a servant of Christ's mission.

- I wonder what the Ascension means to you?
- In what aspects of the world can you see God's kingdom come?
- In what parts of your life can you see God's kingdom?
- Perhaps you would like to use the image and words of the Spiritual exercises here to enable your worship.

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[1] Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 26.

[2] *New Revised Standard Version*.

[3] *Ascension and Ecclesia* pp. 23f.

[4] *Ascension and Ecclesia* pp. 26-7.

[5] London: SPCK, 2007.

[6] This and all passages from the *Exercises* are taken from the translation of Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998) p. 174.

A reflection on the meaning of the Ascension

Based on the thoughts of Damian Howard SJ. (shortened by Revd Becky!)



What is the meaning of the event of the Ascension?

The ascension appears in both the New Testament books authored by Luke in his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. It serves as the narrative lynchpin of the grand story told by scripture. It is the culmination of every biblical event leading up to it and the condition of the drama that follows it. [1]

A good way to begin to understand the Ascension would be to ask yourself a question:

What, in a nutshell, is the core of the New Testament message?

Easterly Answers There are doubtless as many answers to that question as there are Christians, but most of them would probably involve one or more of a bundle of ideas: resurrection—reconciliation—new life—triumph over sin and death, all very good, very Easterly answers – and all, incidentally, very much about us human creatures. The centrality of these notions to most Christians explains both why Easter and Pentecost are so important to us *and* why the Ascension is not. Easter and Pentecost can be quickly established to be all about us: the promise of forgiveness and new life *for us*, the gift of the Spirit *to us*. It is not quite so clear

what the Ascension has to offer us? The best answer I have been able to come up with is that Christ's withdrawal brings about a new mode by which Christ can be present *to us*, intimate, yet universal and 'interceding *for us* at the right hand of the Father'.

The Kingship of Jesus Christ For the New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, the core truth of Christianity is that Jesus, and hence God, has become King. The crucified Nazarene has been raised by God to be the *universal* Lord. Christ's rising from the dead is not in itself the end of the story but a vitally important part of the trajectory that takes him to his heavenly throne. Wright's interpretation hardly denies the importance of resurrection; it just sees it as part of a bigger picture. Jesus is raised to be King.

A crowning moment. What makes Kingdom-Christianity a different interpretation is the way it makes sense of the whole narrative of the Bible. It offers a 'crowning moment' or the final resolution of an expectation spelt out in a spectacular apocalyptic scene by the prophet Daniel (7:13-14):

*I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.[2]*

Here, the coronation of the 'one like a human being' (the original expression is translated literally as 'one like a Son of Man', from which you can deduce whence Jesus derives His favourite way of referring to Himself) is presented exactly as an onlooker in heaven would enjoy the scene.

The Ascension is no quirky interlude between Resurrection and Pentecost but a dramatic consummation that makes sense of them: the Resurrection is the beginning of Christ's heavenly journey, Pentecost the echo on earth of heaven's jubilation at his coronation.

Kingdom-Christianity in no way cancels out or negates Resurrection-Christianity: it includes it but situates it in a bigger picture and it is a picture that does not have us at the centre, with our desires and hopes, but the person of, if you like to think of it like this, King Jesus.

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola use a vivid engagement with Christ, the Eternal King

An autobiographical incident that took place when Ignatius was on pilgrimage in Jerusalem highlights the importance of the Ascension for him. He was about to be expelled from the Holy Land by the Franciscan authorities but before heading for the coast he was desperate to do one last thing: to revisit a particular site from the pilgrim's itinerary, the place where, tradition has it, Jesus ascended into heaven. Bribing the guards with a pair of scissors, of all things, Ignatius managed to get up to the Mount of Olives where he could check the exact position of Christ's footprints before He was taken off into the cloud!

If you consider the image on the front page it reflects one of the most common depictions of Jesus throughout Ignatius time period : the eschatological Christ seated on a throne, surrounded by an oval aura (called a mandorla) and the four apocalyptic beasts. This figure, known as the *maiestas domini*, adorns many a Cathedral entrance, reminding worshippers below that Christ is their King here and now. The mandorla was significant too, an unmistakeable reference to the birth canal. The figure of the King in the mandorla, the Kingdom in the very process of being born, echoes the Lord's prayer: 'thy Kingdom come!' It is a dynamic image of God's Kingdom coming to us as we look on, a reminder that if the Kingdom is indeed already a reality, nevertheless it has not yet fully arrived.

Ignatius took this icon as his preferred depiction of the Lord. Whenever he imagines himself standing before God, offering himself for service in whatever way God will decide, he speaks of God/Christ as 'the Divine Majesty':

Then I shall reflect within myself and consider what, in all reason and justice, I ought for my part to offer and give his Divine Majesty, that is to say, all I possess and myself as well... (*Sp Exx 234*)[6]

and to allow oneself to enter into the scene of that image, adopting the behaviour appropriate to it:

how much more is it worthy of consideration to see Christ our Lord, the eternal king, as to all and to each one in particular his call goes out: 'It is my will to conquer the whole world and every enemy and so enter into the glory of my Father... (*Sp Exx 95*)

And:

Here will be to see myself in the presence of God our Lord and of all his saints that I might desire and know what is more pleasing to His Divine