

The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord

Overview

We are nearly through the Easter season as we come to another important event in the life of the Church – the Ascension of the Lord.



The date for celebration of the Ascension

In days past, we used to refer to this day as “Ascension Thursday” because the Lord stayed with the Apostles for 40 days before returning home. Sadly, this is a Holy Day of Obligation that was largely overlooked if it did not occur on a Sunday. Therefore – primarily in the USA – this feast day is moved to the following Sunday.

What is the Ascension?

In scriptures, we see that a few ancient holy people were said to have been taken directly to heaven. Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-14) are a few such examples. Later we can read where other great people were taken to heaven such as Baruch, Ezra and Moses.

Ascension into heaven became to be expected in the Jewish community for great and holy persons – as a sign of divine approval for them. After nearly 3 years of walking with the Lord, Jesus was leaving them again after his Resurrection. Luke 24:50-51- *Then he led them (out) as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven.* Jesus also told that he would return soon and that he would be with them until the “end of time”. The Ascension of Jesus is the final event of his earthly mission.

The theology of Ascension

Theologically, there is a difference between the holy people and Jesus in how they got to heaven. For the holy people we use the term “taken” into heaven by God because they did not control that action. Jesus “ascended” into heaven, which means that he did it on his own accord – since he is God – and needed no further assistance.

In the early church it was first interpreted that Jesus’ ascension was the action of God’s to cancel out the shame of the cross. Later – under inspiration of the Holy Spirit – it became the common belief that the ascension is the result of the heavenly rule as Lord, seated at the right hand of God, the Father. As further understandings of Jesus matured, Jesus was said to have ascended of his own power.

This feast day is also interpreted as the expression as Jesus’ supremacy over creation – as God – which also makes possible the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Resurrection expressed the triumph over death by revealing Jesus as the risen Christ. Therefore, the Ascension assures all believers that Jesus is ever present with God the Father. While the Risen Jesus is no longer physically present with his followers, he is always present with us just as he told us.