

# Homily for the Feast of the Ascension

*A sermon preached at the High Mass for Ascension Day in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, on Thursday, 18 May 2023, by The Reverend Canon David Stanton, Sub-Dean of Westminster Abbey*

**T**HE two significant royal services that have recently taken place at Westminster Abbey were, at their heart, spiritual journeys.

The funeral of our late Queen, marking the end of a glorious reign, with her soul offered back to God her creator, and the coronation with Charles given to us as King, with his breast and hands anointed in service to God and people, marking the beginning of a new Carolean era.

But, in today's feast of the Ascension, the mystery of the divine journey of Our Lord contains a paradox whereby, in one sense, Christ 'leaves' us and is taken away into Heaven, but, in another sense, he is given to us and to the world in a new and more universal way.

Here in the Ascension, Christ's glory is at once revealed and concealed. *"For after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God."*

In our human life, we too can make two kinds of journey. First of all, we can make journeys to a new place, perhaps to university, to college, or even to a new country. We come across sights, landscapes, and customs which we may never have previously observed.

The most perfect example of this kind of journey is a pilgrimage. Here, we leave behind our familiar surroundings simply for the glory of God. The other kind of journey is the opposite to this; here, we return to our native city, or our native land, or just return back to be with our family. We call this a homecoming.

Beautiful works of poetry have been written about both these kinds of journeys, the pilgrimage and the homecoming, and we like them both, since both the new and the familiar give us pleasure.

What is unique about the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is that it unites both these journeys into one. The Ascension is what no other journey can ever be: it is both a journey to a new land and a homecoming.

So how is this possible? First of all, the Ascension is a journey to another land, to what Scripture calls *"the land of the living"*, to heaven

itself. Until now, the place where Christ has lived has been on earth. “*I have not yet ascended to my Father,*” as He tells St Mary Magdalen on the morning of Easter Sunday.

As man, He had been conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin in Nazareth; He had lived on earth for some thirty-three years; then He had descended in His holy soul united with the Divinity into the realm of the dead to release the captives in Limbo; and then He had lived again another forty days on earth in His risen, immortal body. But only today does He ascend to the Father.

The Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ was a new moment in His human life. It was, we can say, part of the reward which He received from His Father, for His obedience to the Father’s will.

As St Paul says, “*He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death (...) for which cause, God exalted him.*”

Christ Himself in one of his parables compares the Ascension to a journey to a foreign land. He says, “*A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.*”

He is speaking of Himself, prophesying that He would ascend to heaven, and there as man receive kingly power, ready to return to earth at the end of time. And we can suppose that our Lord was glad, and rejoiced in His human nature, at the prospect of this journey. Who would not be glad at the prospect of entering heaven?

This is why He says to the apostles at the Last Supper, “*If you loved me, you would be glad, because I go to the Father.*” So, on this day, He is enthroned for the first time at the right hand of the Father. His pilgrimage reaches its glorious, triumphant conclusion.

Yet the Ascension of Christ can also be called a homecoming. He is a divine Person. Therefore, Heaven is His proper place. Heaven is “*the throne of God*”. The glory with which heaven is filled is Christ’s own glory, as it is the glory of the Father and the Holy Ghost. The angels who fill heaven since the creation are His angels. They are, so to speak, His domestic servants.

For us, if we enter heaven, this will be beyond our merits for two reasons: because we are creatures, and because we have sinned. It is only by the pure mercy of God that we can, as the psalmist says, “*lift up mine eyes unto the hills*”, that is, aspire to the heavenly kingdom.

Not so, for Christ: for Him, it could only be by way of exception that He ever dwelt in any other place. Although He lived all His human life on earth, it was as a stranger. *“I am from above,”* He says to the Jews, *“you are from below.”*

The Ascension, then, is both a reward to Christ for His obedience to the Father, and the moment when He claims that which rightfully belonged to Him from the beginning. It is both as triumphant as the conquest of a new land, and as simple and natural as a returning home.

*“If you loved me,”* He tells the apostles, *“you would be glad”*. So, let us be glad. For He has not left us orphans; He has gone to prepare for us a place.

Christopher Wordsworth put it like this:

*See the Conqueror mounts in triumph;  
See the King in royal state,  
Riding on the clouds, his chariot,  
To his heavenly palace gate!*

*Hark! The choirs of angel voices  
Joyful alleluias sing,  
And the portals high are lifted  
To receive their heavenly King.*

*Thou hast raised our human nature  
On the clouds to God’s right hand:  
There we sit in heavenly places,  
There with thee in glory stand,*

*Jesus Reigns, adored by angels;  
Man with God is on the throne;  
Mighty Lord, in thine ascension,  
We by faith behold our own.*

Ultimately, just as His Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection was on our account, His Ascension is too. The Ascension of our Lord then is the culmination of His earthly spiritual journey.

Christ ascended to heaven with the humanity He had assumed and caused to arise from the dead: that humanity is ours, transfigured, made divine, rendered eternal. In other words, the Ascension reveals the 'ultimate vocation' for all of us human beings, each called to the eternal life of the Kingdom of God.