

Apostles Dumbfounded

St. Luke authored the ministry of Jesus for all people, a Gospel for Jew and Gentile. It is a universal Gospel no one is left out, it is a Gospel of praise, a Gospel of Prayer, a Gospel for the poor, a Gospel for outcasts, a Gospel for both women as well as men. The poet F.W. Faber wrote these lines.

*There is a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There is a kindness in his justice'
Which is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of mans' mind.
And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind
Luke's Gospel bears this truth out.*

The author Luke in the Book of Acts tells the story of the beginnings of the early Church, and the acts of the Apostolic Men. In both his Gospel and the book of Acts Luke dedicates or directs his writings to Theophilus.

One of the mysteries of our Bible is "who is Theophilus?" Well Wikipedia tells us that the origin of the name is Greek, which means "friend of God". Now it seems throughout history there has been many Theophilus' with a religious association. Such as Theophilus of Antioch back in 163-182 an early Christian patriarch. Theophilus of Alexandria in 412 who made a pact with the devil, Pope Theophilus of Alexandria in the 950s, head of the Coptic Church, Theophilus Lindsey and English theologian 1723-1808, Theophilus Gale an English nonconformist divine. Then not to be outdone by the English there was MacTheophilus, famous for his refinement of Barley. So one can readily see the name Theophilus is an illustrious name, and a name of a person of stature.

Saint Luke, the Macedonian Jewish proselyte, who was a physician, dedicated his account of the ministry of Jesus, starting from the foretelling of the incarnation of Christ, through the experience of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, to the ascension of Jesus, which we address this Ascension Sunday.

The truth is, no one knows who Theophilus was for sure, most feel he was most likely a very important government official. But it is also interesting to note that in Luke's gospel and in the book of Acts he uses the first person, the pronoun I, in his introduction.

As Luke comes to the end of his gospel story we are not left with a story of despair, rather we see, as Jesus ascending from his followers in Bethany, an awesome, dramatic, and we should consider a joyous occasion. For death had been defeated with the resurrection, Jesus had won the battle over death and evil, he had said previously to his disciples "*look at my hands look at my feet, it is I myself.*" The mission his Father had sent him on was fulfilled. One more step in God's plan for his creation was completed. For Jesus his exaltation to the throne at the right hand of God his Kingly minister began and continues on till his return to this world in glory, when the new kingdom will emerge with Jesus as Jesus as Lord and King.

Quoting from The Trinitarian Faith, T. Torrance, God has chosen to make himself known to us through a movement of love and infinite condescension in which he has drawn near to us by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, thereby bringing himself within range of human knowing. Jesus Christ thus constitutes the bridge between God and man, between the invisible and the visible, the incomprehensible and the comprehensible, the immeasurable and the measurable. It is then, in Jesus Christ through union and communion with him in love, and through sharing in the love of God incarnate in him, that we are able to know God in such a way that our knowledge of God is firm and sure, for it is anchored in the ultimate reality of God's own eternal being.

The ascension of Jesus must have dumbfounded the disciples, for 43 days ago Jesus had been executed and died, three days later he reappears alive and well, he interacts with them for 40 days, teaching and informing them of the new Kingdom of God, and their role as Apostles, to take the Gospel and the new hope for God's creation, and tell the world. Then on that day of ascension Jesus disappears before their eyes.

I have never been to New Orleans to witness first hand a jazz funeral, likewise I have never been to a Salvation Army funeral, both of the latter as I understand are treated more joyfully than conventional Christian funerals. Certainly the loss of a loved one as I have personally experienced is devastating, also with the loss of a child or young person, there can be only great deep despair and sense of loss.

But if we have learned anything in coming to this Church every Sunday morning over the years, death by far is not the end of human existence. Certainly there is a mystery to death, we don't have a road map, we do not know where this place Jesus spoke about called paradise. We will not depart from this world as Jesus did with a physical body, we

will go to this unknown dimension, not in the world's time and space but in God's time and space, where we are assured by St. Paul in Romans we will experience the love of Jesus while awaiting our own resurrection to the new kingdom, where death and sin are no more.

The apostle Luke records the ascension of Jesus at the conclusion of his Gospel, then again in his continuation of his Gospel the Book of Acts in Chapter 1 Jesus is taken up to Heaven. The historical ascension of Jesus to Luke was of great significance and importance, as it should be by all Christians. Times, since the renaissance, where the scientific thought of the new enlightenment have looked upon the biblical ascension of Christ to be absurd, many currently, even within the established Church still offer challenges.

If Jesus did not return with his resurrected body to be with his Father, God, then all we believe is worthless. We tend in our thinking to enjoin the crucifixion, resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into one thought process. This is a mistake, for each are stand alone phenomena. Jesus' ascending to the Heaven, is not just added Christian belief as many have thought, but a profound central belief of our faith.

While this latter statement may be true from a worship perspective, T F Torrance suggests the ascension of Christ, is in this sense the exaltation to power and glory, but through the cross, certainly an exaltation from humility to royal majesty, but through crucifixion and sacrifice, for the power and the glory of the Royal Priest are bound up with his self offering in death and resurrection.

Bishop N.T. Wright whose theology I lean heavily on this morning, suggests that the ascension causes us to think differently about the whole cosmos. Biblically speaking Heaven and Earth are not two different locations within the same continuum of space and matter; rather they are two different dimensions of God's creation. As Wright states, Heaven is the control room, the CEO's office. Remember Jesus said in Matthew's gospel *"All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth."* Jesus is present in heaven as he was on earth in a resurrected body, the same body the disciples met on the road to Emmaus, the same body the disciples witnessed for the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension.

The idea in Jesus being human, yet being present in heaven appears to be misunderstood by many. Many people have a platonic view, by assuming Jesus has become some angelic spiritual being. On the contrary Jesus has the bodily being he existed with after the resurrection, a resurrected body, a body which we all will have when God's new creation, his new kingdom comes into being. Just consider this, we have the Son of God, who came into this world, born by a woman, fully human in all aspects. He lived out his mission given from God, died a sacrificial death, then through the Holy Spirit he was resurrected from death. Jesus of Nazareth, a man ascended, has lived ever since that day, interceding for humanity, with his Father our God.

Oscar Wilde's scene in the play Salome, when Herod hears that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead says, *"I don't wish him to do that, I forbid him to do that. I allow no man to raise from the dead."* *"This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise from the dead."* *"Where is this man,"* demands Herod. *"He is in every place, my lord replies the courtier", "but it is hard to find him."*

N.T. Wright states that *"Get the ascension right, and your view of the Church, of the sacraments can get into focus."*

There was purpose in God sending this divine being Jesus to live amongst us. The fundamental reason being God cares for his creation, he is a God of love. God wanted the generations of this world to know him in human form. By example showing through Jesus that he cares for the weak, the poor, the mentally ill. He loves us so much he was willing to suffer pain himself with the sacrificial death of Jesus to alleviate our sin. We now know that the burden of sin is taken from us, we now know that his new kingdom will offer eternal life to all who accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We all just got to know God better, so we can reach out and touch him. Jesus fulfilled all of God's tasks, his ascension, his returning to the Father was the climax of the greatest event in the history of the world.

Recognizing that Jesus ascended from this world, is present in heaven, existing in human form, absent from us, however equally present in another way, that is through the Holy Spirit.

N.T. Wright states that *"Get the ascension right, and your view of the ascension helps bring the sacraments and the church more into focus."*

We experience and meet his presence in celebration of the sacraments, for it is through the sacraments we meet him both in communion and baptism, then we are fully aware Christ is present with us. Churches and great cathedrals throughout the world attempt through architecture, stained glass windows, icons, great gothic building statues and paintings to try to grasp and capture a sense of heavenly holiness. They may capture a beautiful environment conducive for worship, but we can only speculate about heaven. We have traditionally thought of God's creation to be three tiered, Heaven and hell with the world in between. I would suggest to you that God's cosmos is more sophisticated than traditional thinking. Christians of this age should consider viewing the worldly dimension we exist in as a small part of God's cosmos, where in all possibility, we live in another time and space from God's heaven.

Jesus' message was to bring about the Kingdom of God to this world, not we going to heaven. Jesus the King, the royal Priest is in heaven ruling the cosmos, interceding to God on behalf of a sick humanity, for a world gradually being destroyed.

As Jesus ascended into heaven, or more likely, was transformed to another dimension of God's creation. We on our bodily death, will be transformed spiritually to another dimension, Jesus called paradise. Patiently waiting when in a moment of time we will experience the emergence of God's new Kingdom with Jesus as King.

Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Amen.