

## **The Mystery of the Kingdom**

The Sunday After Ascension Day

(From the Gospel *St. John xv. 26 ff., and part of Chap. xvii*)

*15:26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: 27 And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. 16:1 These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. 2 They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. 3 And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.*

The invisible reign of Christ following His ascension is a great mystery, and well worth our study. His rule contains many paradoxes that defy the classic portrait of a great king administering his kingdom.

Today's Collect begins with: *O God, the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven...* There can hardly be a grander image than that of a great king ascending the stairway to his throne to begin his royal reign. The Bible description of the Ascension, however, allows us only to view the very first stages of Christ's victorious return to heaven, where He now *sitteth on the right hand of the Father*, as we quote so often in our devotions and divine services in the Creed.

The apostles, although they have greatly rejoiced at His resurrection, are still in complete darkness about the timing of events yet to come in the ministry of Christ. Quoting the Epistle from Ascension Day:

*When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. (Acts 1: 6,7)*

His reply to them seems almost a rebuke, but it also contains a repetition of a theme He has continually brought to their attention, and now, for the very last time:

*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. (8)*

During His last days with His beloved disciples, Jesus spoke often of the Holy Spirit, and the central role that the Third Person of the Trinity would now be playing among them, as the Church is born, and proceeds upon its mission to be Christ's witnesses throughout the world.

The long and the short of it is that Christ has clearly delayed His visible ministry as ruling and reigning King until some yet undisclosed time in the future. The disciples, and the Church, would not be privileged to have the visible presence of their monarch, to whom they

might resort regularly, whom they could worship without reserve, with whom, as members of God's chosen people, they would expect to someday hope to reign the nations themselves.

There was certainly no dearth of promises from Scripture about the visible kingship of Messiah, with which they would have been thoroughly familiar. To quote only a few:

*Isaiah 33:17 Your eyes will see the King in His beauty; They will see the land that is very far off...20 Look upon Zion, the city of our appointed feasts; Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet home, A tabernacle that will not be taken down; Not one of its stakes will ever be removed, Nor will any of its cords be broken. 21 But there the majestic Lord will be for us A place of broad rivers and streams, In which no galley with oars will sail, Nor majestic ships pass by 22 (For the Lord is our Judge, The Lord is our Lawgiver, The Lord is our King; He will save us)*

*Psalm 24: 7 Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. 8 Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, The Lord mighty in battle. 9 Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. 10 Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory. Selah*

*Psalm 72: Give the king Your judgments, O God, And Your righteousness to the king's Son. 2 He will judge Your people with righteousness, And Your poor with justice. 3 The mountains will bring peace to the people, And the little hills, by righteousness...7 In His days the righteous shall flourish, And abundance of peace, Until the moon is no more. 8 He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth...17 His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed.*

But for now, Christ has chosen to accomplish His lordship of the earth from the unseen vantage of Heaven. He awaits the thorough proclamation of the Gospel --the Good News of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension-- before He will consummate the ages by making His visible appearance.

This places a great burden on His own citizens, the redeemed and the saved, for they must be able to operate only by faith..., not by sight, not by their senses, but in union with the Holy Ghost. They will receive no written instructions other than what the Holy Ghost mandates through the writings of the apostles. They will have to faithfully treasure and guard both those Scriptures and apostolic tradition in order to pass down intact a knowledge of the Kingdom, its workings, and administration, safely to ensuing generations. This has been a very major part of the duties of each successive Christian age. And they must be able to manfully and successfully resist the invisible enemies of the Kingdom (Ephesians 6:10-18), for Christ has not promised to fight all of their battles for them.

The subjects of an earthly and visible ruler might imagine themselves to occupy coveted positions within his court. Some might be pages, others personal servants, others his advisers and counselors, others his knights and soldiers. To each would be apportioned some degree of power, from the king, which would be cherished and held closely by them as a means of exercising and enjoying their own personal power over others. But not so Christ's heavenly Kingdom, which,

although it operates also by rules, laws, and regulations, as must and government, does so by a completely different set of them. Although there is an operative hierarchy in the Church structure, it is characterized not by dictatorial demonstrations of mastery but by constant demonstrations of the virtues. Note today's Epistle:

*7 But the end of all things is at hand : be ye therefore sober , and watch unto prayer. 8 And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.*

Love is to be the greatest law in this new Kingdom of God, the age begun by the Ascension. It is also the chief identifying aspect of its citizens. It is the stamp that Christ uses to certify the citizenship of His true subjects wherever they go. Without it, they are mere fakes and impostors, and deserve to be turned back summarily whenever they cross the borders into the world, as it were, to advance the Gospel in it. And often, they are, without even realizing it, because their passports are indeed invalid.

Alas, how great and many are the sins of the professing Church against these regulations imposed by their Monarch! How numerous are the infractions! How easily ignored they are, and quickly covered up and justified under a thousand pretexts, whether they be the preservation of purity of doctrine, or the reestablishment of the "real" church", or the judgment and expulsion of those mistakenly and hatefully called heretics! Help us, Lord.

What will be left of His Kingdom by the time Christ has chosen to return? He Himself spoke these terrible words:

*Luke 18:7 ...shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?*

In other words, will the King find any subjects to rule over when He come back? Or will the Church, so torn and divided by schism, and by its flagrant disregard of Kingdom principles, have reduced itself nearly to nonexistence? Thankfully, we have promises from Christ that grant us assurance. When He spoke to Peter, to whom He gave special authority, He said:

*Matt. 16:18...I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

We are soon to leave the short season of Ascensontide and enter Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost is poured out upon the Church from the Father and the Son. When received by ready and willing hearts, the Spirit will cover its recipients from head to toe, and fill them to the brim, so that they truly shine forth in this world of immense darkness with a light of holiness and intensity that cannot be mistaken for anything other than a precious gift of divine origin. To Him, not to a visible Jesus Christ, we are to yield, to prepare ourselves for, to not grieve but to facilitate, to recognize and submit to.

There will be untold blessings for us who populate the domain of our King in its present form. But Christ also warns us in today's Gospel:

*These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended . They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh , that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.* Perhaps the thought of further persecution at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities had prompted the disciples, weary and exhausted from the three-year ordeal of their tutelage under Christ, culminating in the events of the Passion, to ask Him if the time for the Messiah of Israel to rule in peace and uncontested supremacy was upon them. We can well understand them.

How does one effectively equate the promise of the experience of more persecutions with the Ascension of Christ to the Father's right hand? For that matter, how does one understand the division and great convulsions that have characterized the Church ever since its inception?

These things rest very squarely within the realm of mystery. We do not know what Christ's specific intentions are in each of our lives, nor in the Church, by apparent events and a status quo that seem to defy any sense of being divinely governed and ordered. But this is surely the great proving ground of faith. Here is where souls are truly tested for eternal, joyous, unspeakably wonderful rule with the Ascended One who has promised to return. The Apostle Paul spoke to us in words larger than life: *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Romans 8:28).

So when we contemplate these seasons central to our Church calendar: Ascension, and Pentecost, we can give glory to the God who has said:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8,9)

Let us wholeheartedly embrace these holy truths, and not shrink back at their implications for us today, right here, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*