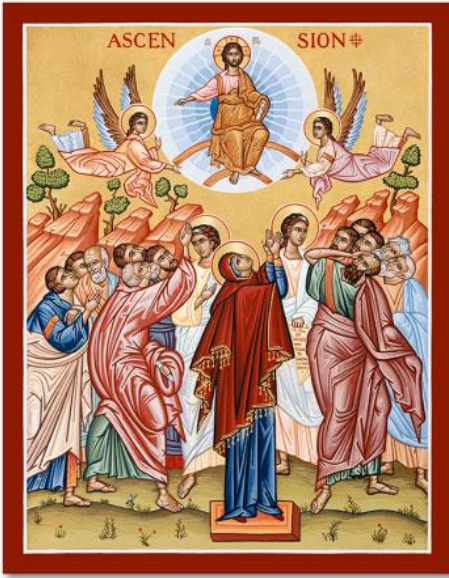


## Ascension of our Lord

*'I am going away and coming back to you. (John 14:28)*

Father Deacon Howard



The Feast of Ascension falls on the 40th day after the Resurrection. In the first three centuries it wasn't celebrated as a separate feast but was combined with the feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit. In the 4th century it became a universal feast, celebrated everywhere. The Eastern Church Fathers often spoke of this feast in their sermons, for example, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Epiphany of Cyprus, and Leo the Great. St. John Chrysostom in his homily on the feast of the Ascension said, "today the human race is completely reconciled with God. The ancient battle and enmity have disappeared. We who were unworthy to live even on earth are now lifted up to heaven. Today we become heirs to the kingdom of heaven and inherit the throne of the King and Lord. Human nature, against which the cherubim guarded paradise, is now raised up above all the cherubim".

The gospel words "he departed from them and was carried up into heaven" shouldn't be thought of as the end of a story. The story is on-going. The Church rejoices on Ascension Thursday because Christ (God and Man) is now seated at the right hand of the Father. It's a joyful time and a time of great promise. Christ ascended into heaven, in order to send us the Comforter - the Holy Spirit - and to prepare a place for us, as he promised. "I will come again", he tells us in John 14:3, "and I will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." He tells us that our death isn't the end of the story. It continues but in a different and wonderful way. We will be with Christ and we shall see God (1 John 3:2). The marvelous mysteries of the universe will unfold. The greatest being the incomparable happiness we will experience in the presence of God.

We will also see the glory of Christ in Godhead in all its majesty. John 17:24 Jesus says "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou have given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world." Luke 13:29; 14:15 speaks of this everlasting happiness comparing it to a banquet which God prepares for us: a banquet at which all the longings of the human heart for happiness will be unimaginable satisfied. The Apostles talked of the happiness which awaits us. Paul (1 Cor: 13:12) says that on earth we see God in a mirror dimly, but in heaven it will be face to face, and the happiness we will enjoy there is indescribable.

John (6:40) talks of our immortality the joy of unending life in Heaven. The happiness of eternal life lies principally in the direct, immediate vision of God. It involves not only a perfect intellectual knowledge of God but also a sharing of life with God, One and Triune. Contemplating the three Divine persons will bring us unlimited joy. St. Escriva was quoted as saying the “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the mind of man to imagine the things that God has prepared for those who love him. Can you imagine what it will be like to arrive there, and meet God and see that beauty which pours into our hearts and satisfies without satiating our desire? What will it be like when all the beauty, all the goodness, all the infinite wonder of God pours into this poor clay vessel that we are?”

Apart from the immense joy of beholding God and seeing and living with the risen glorified Christ there is also an accidental happiness, by means of which we will enjoy those good things to which we aspire: the company of those blessed members of our family and friends. Our personality will be the same, as will our body, but it will be vested with glory and splendor, if we have been faithful. Our body will have the properties characteristic of glorious bodies: agility and subtlety, i.e. not subject to the limitations of space and time; impassibility.

In the Book of Revelation chapter 21 John says of the Kingdom of Heaven. Every tear from our eyes will be wiped away. There will be no more death, no more grief, or crying or pain. Finally, there will be brightness and beauty. There will be a new order: the present earth will have been transformed: “Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth; for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away... Behold I make all things new.”

The thought of Heaven should lead us to a more determined and cheerful struggle to get rid of the obstacles which separate us from Christ. To encourage us to seek as our first priority, things that will last (the good) not those things that perish. The Ascension is a time of hope. Nothing here is irreparable, nothing is definitive, and all wrongs can be made right. The only definitive defeat is to miss the door which opens to everlasting Life. The door to which our Blessed Lady always points is the door which leads to the resurrected Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church of the Ukrainian Rite sums up the whole period from the Passion, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost with the proclamation that is repeated over and over in the Divine Liturgy. “Christ is Risen from the Dead, trampling death by death, so that those in the Tomb may be granted everlasting life”.