

## ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Some people like stories to reflect their orderly view of the world: with a beginning, a middle and an end, having a pattern and purpose that can be seen and understood; having a conclusion that ties up all the loose ends, leaving people with a sense of completion and satisfaction. When the book is closed there are no more questions to be asked. It is finished.

Other people prefer their stories open-ended, because they believe life is like that: with a variety of loose connections and accidental happenings; having a development that can never be fully grasped; not having a tidy ending, because tidiness can neither reflect either the muddle or the mystery of things. When the book is closed the questions do not cease.

Depending on your own point of view and preference, you can read the story of Jesus' ascension as a story that completes everything or as a story that leaves everything open-ended. Of course the ascension does complete the mission of Jesus; it is the last act of the cycle of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, celebrating the return of Jesus to the Father. The ascension is also open-ended, for it marks the beginning of a new time when the apostles have to live in the absence of the Jesus they knew. They have to come to terms with the fact that Jesus will never again walk with them on the roads of Palestine, healing the sick and the wounded, preaching about the kingdom of God. That time is over. He is gone.

“Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking in the sky ?” So the show *isn't* over, the curtain hasn't fallen, the action isn't completed. The ending of the Gospel of Mark emphasizes this: “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation.” That process is open-ended. It is still going on.

Not only is the process still continuing, but we don't really know if we are at the beginning of the Christian movement, in the middle of it, or near the end of it. It could all end tomorrow in a nuclear mushroom. It could continue for thousands of years. We don't know. All we know is that we are somewhere between the beginning and the end and that we are addressed by the same challenge to keep the story of Jesus alive.

We are in-between people, we find ourselves in the middle of a complex variety of stories which compete for our attention. None of us can start at the beginning of those stories, because we are middle people. None of us started from zero: we were all born into a world that was already in motion; we found ourselves in the midst of a history we did not originate;

we were ushered into a family and a tradition we did not form. We inherited the times we live in. We could make a start for ourselves only because we were given a start by others.

The story of Jesus was a power that was given to us, a gift of life to help us shape the world. The story does not simply reflect how things are, but calls us beyond ourselves to a kingdom that is larger than the boundaries of geography and nationality and culture.

The story of Jesus' ascension reminds us that Jesus is beyond us – sitting at the right hand of God. But the same story also reminds us that the Lord was working with the apostles by confirming their word by the signs that accompanied it.

The Gospel beckons us, calls us on, challenges us to move beyond the boundaries that are set by our own fear and weakness and sinfulness. That won't take us into the clouds, but it will provoke people to stare in wonderment at us for moving on. Our stories are not finished, the last word has not been written, the final scenes are still open-ended. Where the future is a mystery there is still hope; it is only when the future looks like an endless repetition of the past that there is a feeling of hopelessness. And hopelessness is not Gospel. Only in God's own time will this part of the story be brought to completion.