

“The Beginning of Christian Worship”

“Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. (Ps. 24:7)

On this day when we celebrate our Lord’s Ascension and triumphant entrance into heaven, let us include in our celebration some Bible study of the Biblical record. Please turn in your pew Bibles to page 51 in the New Testament, and we will look at the Introduction to the Gospel of St. Luke. The 1st verse begins, “Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us....” And it continues in the 3rd verse, “It seemed good to me also...to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus...” The introduction states that this Gospel is written for one Theophilus. We don’t know who Theophilus is. The name frequently appears during that period. It means “Lover of God”. The words “most excellent” may be a title, and Theophilus may be a Roman official. (Many Biblical scholars think that St. Luke’s Gospel was written for a Gentile audience.)

Now turn in your pew Bibles to page 108 in the New Testament, to the 1st verse of the 1st chapter of Acts. And what do we read? “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, Until the day in which He was taken up....” There is that name again, Theophilus. This name, in the beginning of St. Luke and in the beginning of Acts, is one of many indications that the Gospel of St. Luke and the Book of Acts are volumes I and II of one complete work. The first volume, the Gospel of St. Luke, ends with the Event we celebrate today, the Ascension of Christ. And the second volume, the Book of Acts, begins at the same point, the Ascension. Two volumes of one work. The fact that these two volumes go together would be more apparent, if the Gospel of St. John were not stuck in between them. (Why the books are arranged this way, I don’t know. The Gospel of John is different from the 3 Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is almost certainly later than the other three. But it is classified with the gospels.)

At any rate, Luke and Acts are two volumes of one work, and the turning point from one to the other is the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. This Event was also a turning point for the disciples. Jesus led them from Jerusalem, out past the Mount of Olives to Bethany, the familiar town of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. And in those familiar surroundings He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And what did the disciples do? The Gospel says “...they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy....” (24:52) St. Matthew says the same. They worshiped Him. Mark you, this is the first time the Gospels have ever mentioned that the disciples worshiped the Lord! They have come close. When the Lord asked the disciples, “But whom do ye say that I am?” Peter answered, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (St. Mt. 16:16) But nothing is said about worship. And soon after, Peter and James and John were with the Lord on the mountain when He was transfigured. And Peter, who couldn’t think of anything to say, suggested they make three booths. (St. Mk. 9:5) But nothing is said about worship. Even after His Resurrection, when Thomas - Doubting Thomas

- demanded to see the wounds and then may his great affirmation: “My Lord and my God” nothing is said about worship. It was only when our Lord was ascending to the right hand of the Father that Scripture says they worshiped Him. This moment was a turning point for the first disciples. This is, I believe, the beginning of Christian worship.

It was a turning point for the first disciples. It is a turning point for us. Up to this point, starting the last Sunday of last November, we began to prepare for the earthly ministry of Jesus, for the Incarnation and Baptism, for his earthly ministry, choosing the disciples, , His Trial and Crucifixion and Resurrection. His earthly ministry. Now we prepare for His heavenly ministry in glory at the right hand off the Father.

“Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious;
See the Man of Sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious,
Every knee to Him shall bow....”

“Every knee to him shall bow.” Many, hopefully, will bow willingly. Some may bow reluctantly. Others perhaps will bow unwillingly. But Scripture is clear:

“That at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven,
and things on earth, and things under the earth: And that every tongue
should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the
Father.” (Phil. 2:10 – 11)

It is a turning point for us: from what He has done in the past – our justification – to what He is doing in the present: the work of His Kingdom in our world today.

And we have a part in that work in His Kingdom today. And let us remember the important role the laity have in the work of the Kingdom. You remember that for 150 years after the Anglican Church came to this country, there was not a bishop in this country. Therefore, people like George Washington and Patrick Henry and James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were never confirmed. (I have read somewhere, but I cannot document it, that George Washington ever took communion.) It was a scandal! The bishops had become so comfortable, they had lost the missionary zeal of the early bishops of the Celtic Church. And much of the work of the Anglican Church in this country was done by the laity, including the lay readers, along with the few clergy who could be ordained in England. The laity played a crucial role then. The laity play a crucial role today. Much of the backbone of the Traditional Church movement has been supplied by the laity, with their devotion to the 1928 Prayer Book.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are 2 volumes of one work. The turning point is the Ascension of Christ. It was a turning point for the first disciples. At the Ascension, “...they worshiped Him....” It is a turning point for us, from what He has done for us in the past – His one

oblation of Himself once offered – to what He is doing with us in the present, in the work of the Kingdom of our triumphant Lord!

Preached on Ascension Day, 5 May 2005, at All Saints Church, Pensacola, Florida, by The Rev. Hugh B. Hall, Jr.,