

A Sermon for the Ascension, Given on May 24, 2009

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When people think about heaven, various images come to mind. Sometimes people envision luminosity or brightness. Sometime people envision peaceful scenes from nature. Sometimes people think of it as an undefined “better place.”

When the Bible describes heaven, that is, the place where God lives, two images prevail. Heaven has a throne and heaven has an altar. To be sure, the images of throne and altar are clothed with luminosity and grandeur. There are cherubim and seraphim and, in the image given in Revelation, the whole company of the redeemed is present. Yet, if we look carefully, throne and altar dominate.

The image of the throne is easy enough to understand: God is king. As Psalm 95 says, “The Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” And as Palm 47 says, “God is the King of all the earth.” God, who made the world, is also ruler of the world.

Mankind was created to rule with God. That is why, in Genesis, God made man in his image and gave man dominion over all the other creatures” (1:26). Mankind was created in the image of the great king to rule as kings over God’s creation.

The perfect reign of God, and mankind’s sharing in that reign, was marred by rebellion. We believe, by tradition that the first rebellion against God’s reign occurred in heaven. The angel called Lucifer, the light bearer, refused to be subject to the Great King. Then, by deceit, that fallen angel got humanity to join in the rebellion.

This explains why heaven has an altar as well as a throne. Something must be done to right the wrong, to atone for the sin. Thus, just after first sin, Abel offered sacrifice to God. The first mention of a formal altar is in the story of Noah, who offered sacrifice just after the flood (Genesis 8:20). After that, the altar is a standard piece of furniture in the story of Israel.

Mankind was made to sit on a throne with God. Through sin, we lost our royal status. Instead we find ourselves kneeling before the altar, praying that God, the Great King, will forgive us and restore us to our intended dignity.

The Bible tells us that none of the bulls or goats or lambs that were offered on the altars of the Old Testament was sufficient to accomplish forgiveness and reconciliation with God in a full and final way. So God sent his Son. As Hebrews says, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me” (10:5). On the cross, Jesus offered the perfect and sufficient sacrifice that brings us forgiveness and reconciliation with God once and for all.

On the Feast of Ascension, Jesus returns to heaven to present himself continually before the Father on our behalf. There is an altar in heaven. On that altar, the crucified and risen Christ, the “Lamb as though it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6), continually intercedes for us. Through his sacrifice, we are restored to communion and fellowship with God.

The feast of Ascension is also the coronation of Jesus as king. Jesus willingly surrendered his crown

and was made lower than the angels so that he might live and die for us. Now, having finished his work, he returns to heaven to reign, to be crowned with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5).

The heavenly coronation has the note of conquest. In the Old Testament, a king typically defeated God's enemies before he was fully acknowledged to be king. So Jesus, by his obedient death, crushed the Enemy under his feet. As Hebrews says, "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death" (2:14). That Enemy, whom we call the devil and Satan, held us captive by guilt and temptation. But now heaven gives us the answer for these: the altar and the throne.

When we sin or feel guilty, we can come to the altar of God, confess our sins and be forgiven. As Hebrews says, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God...let us come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (4:14,16).

Having been forgiven and reconciled with God, we begin to reign again with Christ. Or, Christ begins to reign again in us. By his power and his grace, we can begin to resist the temptations into which we once fell. We can begin to do the good works that he has prepared for us to walk in. Rather than being controlled by things, we can begin again to exercise dominion over the creation.

Heaven has a throne and an altar because these are the things we need. We need mercy and forgiveness. And we need strength and power. We who drift away from God because of human weakness, need the blood of Jesus to wash us and make us clean. And we, who are concerned about the future and direction of the world, need Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to rule over our lives and make all things work together for good, to bring God's order and beauty out of chaos. The Bible describes the result of altar and throne as new creation: Revelation says, "Behold, I make all things new" (21:5).

If you ever wonder why the church has, as its centerpieces, an altar and an image of Jesus on his throne, Ascension gives us the answer. The throne and the altar are centerpieces of heaven, and the church is designed to confront us with and connect us with these heavenly things.

Ascension reminds us of two central truths that speak to the human condition. Christ is present in heaven to intercede for us so that we can be forgiven, so that our prayers can be heard, so that we can be restored to communion with God. And Jesus is Lord. He is the ruler of all. He will bring this world, and each of our lives, to the glorious conclusion he has planned for us, as Philippians says, "by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself" (3:20).

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