

The Feast for the Ascension of Our Lord

Acts 1:1-11

He was taken up, Saint Luke writes about our risen Lord Jesus, after He had given commandments to the apostles through the Holy Spirit. Now, why would he write that the risen Christ gave commandments through the Holy Spirit, being that He Himself was right there?

Because it is by the Holy Spirit that He does all that He does; just as it was by the Holy Spirit that He did all that He did.

And that is the point of what we hear tonight; that what He did He still does, in the same way as He always did: by the Holy Spirit.

I made the former account, O Theophilus, Luke writes, as we hear it, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach until the day in which He was taken up; and what we hear tonight is the beginning of his subsequent account, that of what our Lord Jesus did after that, that is: the Book of Acts. So the Gospel according to Saint Luke is his account of what our Lord Jesus began to do, rather than about all that He ever did. And the Book of Acts is his account of what our Lord Jesus continued to do during the first few years of the life of His Church, after He was taken into Heaven. So also the Book of Acts is all about what our Lord Jesus did. And all that He did, He did through the Holy Spirit; as it was through the Holy Spirit that He gave commandments to the Apostles even before He was taken up, while He Himself was still right there with them. For all that He does, He does through the Holy Spirit.

Yes, for the Holy Spirit is His very own Spirit; as our Lord Jesus is the Son of God, and God Himself from eternity, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. He is the *breath of God*, and that is what both the Hebrew and the Greek words for *Spirit* also mean, that is: He is the very life of God, and His very innermost self. As the holy Apostle Paul writes it: *Who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

Our Lord Jesus gave commandments to the Apostles through His Spirit, that is: out of His very innermost self. And through His Spirit He made them to understand and accept the commandments He gave them, as He breathed His life into their hearts, with His Word, and His innermost self, and shared His Spirit with them.

Just as it was according to the Spirit of holiness He had been declared to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it; by the power of God, the power of His life, in accordance with the holiness and righteousness of His own nature, according to which He who had died for the sin of the world, but could not remain in death, being without sin as He was, and is, and having nothing in Himself that belonged to death, for death is but the wages of sin, and so the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, as the Apostle also writes it, for with His sufferings and death the price and penalty has been paid for the sin of all sinners, in full and in abundance, and so He has won salvation and eternal life for all sinners, and gives it, freely and for nothing, and fully and for real, with His promise, to all who hear His promise and take it to heart in faith.

And it was through His Spirit, that is, with His innermost self, and by His power of life, that He had given Himself up to suffer and die for sinners in the first place. As the Letter to the Hebrews writes it: *the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself to God without blemish will cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

In other words, it is because He who bore the judgement of God against the sin of all sinners, it is because He is the Son of God, and God Himself, and the Holy One of God, in whom is no sin, and because He bore the fullness of suffering for real, in that most real reality which is the reality of God, therefore is it that His suffering is a sufficient sacrifice for the salvation of sinners, sufficient to make up for the evil iniquity and injustice that sin is, sufficient to make right the wrong, sufficient to make wrongdoers right with God and righteous before His judgement, sufficient to set us sinners free to live before Him, under His love, and serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days, in this life, and for all eternity.

All that our Lord Jesus ever did was done through the Holy Spirit, as is all that He does. For the Holy Spirit is His very own Spirit, His own breath and life, and His innermost self.

Therefore is it also that the two men in white apparel who suddenly stood with the Apostles, whom we are to perceive as being angels from God, that they said to the Apostles, as we hear it that they did: *You men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into Heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into Heaven, will come in like manner as you saw Him go into Heaven.*

It is easy for us to come to think of the Ascension of our Lord as Him having been lifted up beyond the skies and the stars, taken to a place far away. That is where unbelievers believe that Christians believe Heaven is, and the right hand of God, and God Himself. It is also where most Protestants believe our Lord Jesus is. What Holy Scripture teaches, though, is not that the Apostles could continue to see Him being lifted up into the skies until He was too far away for them to see; rather, as we hear it tonight, *He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight*. In other words, He was received into the realm of God, which, Holy Scripture tells us, is not separated from our realm by distance, but actually separated only from our sight!

When Holy Scripture tells us about God manifesting His glorious presence, except in the human body of the Son, it tells us that He did so veiled in a cloud, or in smoke. He followed His people in the Wilderness in a pillar of smoke by day and fire by night; when the Temple was dedicated, the glory of God filled it and veiled it in a thick cloud as of smoke; when He spoke to the Apostles who were with our Lord Jesus on the mountain He did so out of a cloud; and when the Son of God shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead, they shall see Him *coming in a cloud*. When our Lord Jesus was taken up into Heaven, He was not taken away from His disciples; nor is our ascended Saviour separated from His Church, or from His Christians, by vast distance. Rather, again, He is in the realm of God, not really separated from the realm and reality in which we live, rather, separated only from our sight!

As it is written in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: *Thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."* Or as the holy Apostle Paul writes it: *God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come, and put all things under His feet, and gave Him as Head over all things to the Church, which is His body and His fullness who fills all in all.*

Our Lord Jesus having ascended into Heaven does not mean that He is now in a distant place; it means that He is in the power and glory of God, and that as such, He is in and with His Church as her Head, who gives His own life to her, and fills her with His own fullness.

This Jesus who was taken up from you into Heaven, the angels said, will come in like manner as you saw Him go into Heaven. As we hear this, we think of this, that at the end of time He shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, writes the holy Apostle John, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen. But actually, that of which the angels spoke was to be fulfilled not many days from then, as our Lord Jesus had said. For what they spoke was but yet another affirmation of the promise of the Father of which our Lord Jesus had spoken, which, He said, as we heard it, you have heard from me; for John truly baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. And: you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

Yes, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of our Lord Jesus; as our Lord Jesus is the Son of God, and God Himself, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God the very life of God, and His very innermost self. For the Holy Spirit to come upon the Apostles meant for our Lord Jesus Himself to come upon them, invisibly, but nevertheless for real, to be with them and within them, in like manner as He had been taken into Heaven. As our Lord Jesus had also said it, with reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit: *I will not leave you fatherless; I will come to you.*

All that He does, He does by the Holy Spirit, His very own innermost self, with all that He has and all that He is. By the Holy Spirit He lives in His Church, in all His fullness, and gives His own life to her. By the Holy Spirit He has sinners born anew into the very life of God, that which the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit shared from eternity. By the Holy Spirit He has His faithful Church proclaim His promise of full and complete forgiveness for all sin and rescue from eternal death and damnation, won for all sinners with His sufferings and death, and given to us out of His goodness and mercy and for no other reason whatsoever. And by the Holy Spirit He breathes His life into us, with His Word, so that we come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance and believe His promise and seek our salvation in Him, so that we also actually shall not perish and die in His judgement, but rather live and be with Him for ever in His Kingdom, when He comes on the clouds, finally for us to see, in the fullness of His glory.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. *Amen.*