The Ascension of our Lord

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Year B – Easter 7 – Acts 1 1-11 Ps 93 Eph 1 15-23 Mk 16 15-20

The Ascension of our Lord is one of the five great festivals in the Christian calendar. Yet it often goes almost unnoticed. It falls on a Thursday, so there's a tendency in some traditions simply to overlook it; a sort of poor cousin, left high and dry between our celebrations of Easter and Pentecost.

In traditions which *do* focus on the Ascension, you'll often see it represented in art that's based on this morning's reading from the book of Acts. It often shows sad-looking disciples looking up at a cloud that has a pair of feet protruding from its base. Maybe that cloud is meant to represent the one in Exodus which shrouded God by day, leading the people from Egypt. If so, it's a powerful connection; it then makes the Ascension pictures about God leading us from slavery to freedom. But for many people, the seeming farewell focus of Ascension art seems to emphasise losing Jesus; like our extinguishing the Easter candle just now seems to as well.

That's where I find the painting (on our service booklet) by the late Indonesian choreographer and painter Bagong Kussudiardja to be so powerful as an exposition of Christ's Ascension. He shows with explosive energy the incarnation of God in human form taking that human form into the divine. And, according to the image our epistle and Gospel readings give us, that human form now sits at God's right hand. So we have a human voice representing us at the throne of grace. And that also means in some mysterious way that we have divinity represented in every child of God on Earth too. We have a voice interceding for us at the throne of grace.

At this point in our nation's history, this image, where one of *us* speaks on our behalf in the throne-room, is echoed for

me in the Uluru *Statement from the Heart*; the declaration that the original custodians of this continent presented to our government in 2017. It called for an Aboriginal voice enshrined in the constitution; a voice that would speak for first peoples to our parliament.

No wonder it felt so prophetic; it was calling on our government to follow in God's footsteps and, like Christ's Ascension, give an oppressed, alienated people a voice in the throne-room.

The connection I see between the *Statement from the Heart* and the Ascension is this; Christ's Ascension to the throne of grace where he intercedes for us signifies the arrival of the Kingdom of God for us in the form of full citizenship with all its rights and privileges. Finally, full representation, full citizenship in the here and now. And that's what the *Statement from the Heart* proposes for the first-nations people of this continent – finally, full citizenship in the here and now.

I find this practical, here-and-now link with the Ascension is one which helps to broaden my understanding of our faith. And that's a good reason for insisting on marking the feast of the Ascension today. If we'd just left it to pass silently by apart from a handful of us on Thursday – the poor cousin to Easter and Pentecost – we'd miss the perspective it gives us on the wider plan of Christ our King.

Easter speaks to us of resurrection, reconciliation, new life, and triumph over sin and death. And Pentecost speaks of our participation in the power and life of the Spirit. And they're all central to our faith. But with these, our focus can be unwisely confined simply to the effect on us – us at the centre of everything.

Ascension widens our focus to direct our eyes to Christ and see in him our risen, ascended, glorified King. And Ascension opens our eyes to the nature of the Kingdom – to what Jesus

called the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith. [Mt 23.23] Certainly, Easter and Pentecost are front and centre, but without the wider, Kingdom perspective which Ascension gives, our understanding of them is diminished.

This Kingdom perspective helps us live in the paradox of Jesus' absence and Jesus' presence, God's absence and God's presence. Jesus is no longer among us, and yet we affirm that he is with us. We can't touch him or see him, yet we meet him physically and spiritually in each other, and in the experience of the broken bread and wine poured out. Everyday yet extraordinary – God is totally beyond us, and yet through the Ascension, more intimately connected with us than ever. That is a wider perspective, and so somehow more freeing and inviting – calling us beyond our perspectives. For me this is summed up amazingly in the prayer of the week from APBA p. 519.

O God,
you withdraw from our sight
that you may be known by our love:
help us to enter the cloud where you are hidden,
and to surrender all our certainty
to the darkness of faith
in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's rejoice in the Ascension. And at Pentecost, filled with the Spirit, may we feel the warmth of God's presence, comforting and strengthening us as we live in the paradox of separation from God, us with God, and God with us. Amen.