

“The Prophet’s Mantle in the Body of Christ”

Over the past few weeks the Prayer Book has focused our attention on the Ascension of Christ, preparing us to celebrate this Feast of thanksgiving of which we partake tonight. Why is the Ascension of our Lord such an important event in the life of the Church? In the Prayer Book, the Ascension has its own proper preface, along with Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, & Pentecost. The proper preface is the introduction to the holiest part of the Eucharist, the consecration of the bread & wine, so this implies that Ascension Day is one of the highest and holiest feast days of the Church. This means, the whole purpose of celebrating this sacrament tonight is to plead for Christ’s intercession on the day that he ascended into heaven. The night before Christ was betrayed and arrested, he met with his disciples in the upper room and he taught them many things. He told them he was going away, back to the Father who sent him, but he also said he would send to them the Holy Spirit of God. The Ascension of Christ was foretold in the context of the Last Supper, and it was in that same upper room, after his resurrection, that he broke bread with the disciples again, and opened their understanding, so that they could remember what he said, when he explained why he is going away, that he goes to prepare a place for them, and that he would come again, on the last day at the end of time, and even now by the power of the Spirit, in the breaking of bread.

All this talk of the Ascension and the coming of the Spirit would have certainly reminded the disciples of a particular Old Testament figure, that is, the prophet Elijah. Elijah was one of the most important figures in Israel's history, besides Abraham and Moses. We can see this at the Transfiguration of Christ when Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ, as representatives of the Law and the Prophets, bearing witness to the fact that all of God's revelation (in what we call the Old Testament) points to and bears witness of Christ, that He is the Son of God, the greatest of the prophets, because he is the Source and the fulfillment of all the prophets, the very Word of God made flesh. Something happened in the lives of both Moses and Elijah that foreshadowed Christ's Ascension.

At the end of His life, we're told that Moses ascended Mt. Nebo, where God showed him the Promised Land, but God tells Moses that he will not be allowed to go there because He disobeyed the Lord's command at the waters of Meribah. So, Moses dies there on the mountain. His body is then taken and buried in the valley, but the Scriptures say that there was no man there to bury him. It was God who buried him and no one knows the location of his grave. Later, as the Epistle of Jude reveals, many Jewish people believed that Moses had been bodily assumed into heaven after his burial, and that this is why his grave was never found. St. Jude speaks of a dispute between Satan and the archangel Michael over the body of

Moses. Whatever the case may be, Moses appears bodily before St. Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, as Israel's mediator before God.

So, the disciples of Christ should have known that something similar would happen at His Ascension. They also knew the story about Moses and how his spirit is given to Joshua. The Scriptures tell us that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him." Moses' spirit had also been given to the seventy elders of Israel when it became clear that Moses could not bear the burden of the people on His own. Joshua succeeded Moses in the office of mediator, and God said to him, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you" (Josh 1:5). That Spirit gave Joshua and all of God's people the power to descend upon the Promised Land and cleanse it for the sake of God's kingdom.

Likewise, when the time came for God to bring Elijah's prophetic ministry to a close, he too disappeared, this time in a whirlwind with flaming chariots, as he ascended into heaven, presumably that he might also be a mediator on behalf of Israel. Before he departed, Elijah asked his apprentice Elisha what he might do for Elisha before the two are separated. To which Elisha replied "Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." And so, after Elijah ascended into heaven, Elisha was given his master's mantle along with a double portion of his spirit. The prophet's mantle represented his prophetic power. Elijah had used his mantle like Moses' rod to separate the waters of the Jordan river, symbolically repeating Israel's crossing of

the Jordan under the command of Joshua. With these stories of Moses and Elijah in mind, it should have been no mystery to the disciples that Christ, the new and greater Moses and Elijah, would ascend into heaven to act as our mediators, the mediator of the new covenant in his blood.

Now, if our Elijah has ascended into heaven, what is it that he leaves behind for us, but the prophet's mantle and a double portion of his Spirit? That is what the Church expects and celebrates at Pentecost. We are the new Elisha, taking up the mantle of Christ, now that He has assumed command over the heavenly hosts. This was the purpose of His ascension, which we commemorate tonight. He ascended, not only to be our mediator, but in order to take command over God's army, not over some earthly regiment of soldiers whose mortal bodies fight against flesh and blood, but over the whole army of heaven, an eternal army, and one that strikes not with a sword of iron, but with the sword of the Spirit of the Living God.

But, what does it mean for us to have the mantle of Christ? We're told in the second book of Kings that Elisha and his servant were trapped in a city surrounded by an enemy army that was aiming to kill Elisha. There was no way out, and Elisha's servant was certain that they were doomed to die. But, Elisha said, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them," then he prayed to the Lord and asked that his servant's eyes might be opened to the truth. And when the servant's eyes were opened he saw "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of

fire all around Elisha.” Indeed, Elisha possessed a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, for he had command over the fiery chariots of God. Those same chariots that ushered Elijah upward into heaven were now on earth waiting on the man of God, who after hearing his prayer, struck the enemy with blindness. Then Elisha delivered the blinded army into the hands of the king of Israel.

This is what it looks like to have the mantle of Christ. What else are we commanded to do but silence the false tongues and expose the blindness of the wicked rulers of the world, publicly proclaiming, with God’s word and holy signs that we call sacraments, that Christ Jesus is king and Lord of all the earth? Christ commanded us to celebrate a public meal together so that in this meal, the whole world might know that we do not live by bread alone but on the Word of God made flesh. This is the prophet’s mantle, seen in the Supper, given as a gift into our hands, so that we might be filled with a double portion of His Spirit.

We might be tempted to gaze into heaven, as the disciples did. We might think that, since Christ’s kingdom is not of this earth, that we must leave the earth in order to find the prophet’s mantle. But, this is not true. Listen to the angels who appeared to the disciples at Christ’s ascension. These angels, the cherubim of God, said to the disciples, “why stand ye gazing up into heaven, this same Jesus...shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” In other words, don’t look above for Christ, but look down here below for Him, where we will receive power from on

high. Though we pray that we might ascend into heaven with Christ, we don't wait around, sitting idly, doing nothing while we wait for him to return. Despite his bodily ascension, Christ is still Immanuel, God-with-us, and by the mantle that he has left us in word and sacrament, in the visible church, Christ is now filling up the world with His Spirit. Though He is in heaven, He may be found here, in the mystical body of Christ, gathered around the holy altar. The mantle of Christ is the Church, and the Church, like all bodies, becomes what it consumes. You are what you eat, and our nourishment, the prophet's mantle, is given from heaven here in the Holy Eucharist.

The English theologian, Thomas comber, explained it this way:

And now O my soul, why standest thou gazing into Heaven, he is too high to be discerned, too bright to be seen with mortal Eyes, since Cherubims are dazled at his splendor. He is gone to his proper place, and ascended thither, where thy desires carry thee, and where before long thou shalt see him face to face. Thou standest like Elisha, looking after him and lamenting thy Master's departure, but he hath left his Mantle behind him, even the mysteries of this holy Sacrament, which to thy Faith is the flesh which he was cloathed withall, and is designed to convey a double portion of his spirit unto thee.

Just as Elija's mantle was infused with heavenly power, so this blessed sacrament, taken by faith, has the power to unite heaven and earth, even the power to draw us up to heaven to be united spiritually, trully, really, with the body of Christ. This is something more than a prophetic gift. Indeed, in this meal, Christ has left us the very thing to which the prophet's mantle pointed, even the very body and blood with which He was clothed on earth, and in which He has risen from the dead in order to provide eternal life to our bodies here below. The mantle of Christ, his garment, his

covering, His body and blood, is in this meal. This is the way to heaven, the place of our ascension, a mirror of heaven on the earth below.

So, come to the holy altar of God. Receive a double portion of the Spirit of Christ, and use it to pierce through the darkness and outward appearance of bread and wine, and look with the eyes of heaven into the reality of, the reality of Christ hidden here in a great mystery. Come and take up the mantle of Christ, His body and blood, and He will open your eyes, just as he opened the disciples eyes in the breaking of bread, and you will see, by faith and with holy hope, the fiery chariots of God protecting you, and preserving all of the Church from evil, so that in the face of all danger we will be bold to say with Elisha “those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Amen.