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Grip stavkyrkje, Grip

Ascension Day/Helgetorsdag/Kristi himmelfartsdag 29.05.25

Text: John 17: 20-26

Dear sisters and brothers,

We will have a wonderful memory of this special day: We are here to celebrate the fellowship as people and churches here in the middle of the ocean, on this most remarkable place, the island Grip; and to worship together here in the old Grip Stave Church. Actually I think this is one of the most proper places to celebrate Ascension Day.

Ascension Day, or “Kristi himmelfartsdag” (in Norwegian), was one of the most challenging days for a young pastor. What is this really all about? Jesus leaving the earth, “the day of jumping to heaven” as it is called in popular Norwegian?

By God's grace, I was a pastor on four islands in Haram, not far from here, and the tradition there was to have an open-air worship service on Ascension day. Not only was it always a day of sunshine – at least as I remember them – but it opened another perspective on this day for me, making it one of the most significant days during the year for the Church and its mission in the world.

As I prepared, sitting at the site of our worship at the shore, facing the ocean, I got another perspective. Looking at the ocean, we have another view: The sky is actually united with the sea in the horizon. What is up there, is not necessary what is far away. It is actually very close, it is what surrounds us everywhere. And the expression of Christ being “over oss alle, over alt” (Norwegian) is also saying that he is “overalt”. In English: The expression of Christ being above, over the earth and the clouds, actually means that Christ is “all over”, everywhere.

The cosmology is changing through the ages and centuries, I know. But the spiritual message of this day is profoundly speaking to us, as well: God has not disappeared, God is with us – everywhere. The plain view of being at or in the sea, helps us to see that our images of Ascension Day actually should not express distance, or “Godforsakenness”. To the contrary.

Furthermore, it means that the task of the Church is to make it known, to make it visible, even tangible, that God is here, that heaven is here. This is also what we pray every day: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!” And this is what is captured in the motto for the strategies of being Church of Norway and church in Norway and in the world in our time: “Mer himmel på jord”/“More heaven on earth!”

That what it is all about. Nothing less than that. This is also why this day is a day for re-commitment to the mission of the Church: to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with everybody, everywhere and in all times and generations. In what we say, what we are, what we do.

It also a day to reflect on the mission of the Church to be one, in Christ, and to express and promote how this is a matter of being one on earth, in the world and in the times that is ours.

The see has through the generations connected our lands and our people, more than it has divided us. We have all been living from the gifts of the see, the fish and all that has been possible to make out of it as outcome for living and prospering in regions and cities like Kristiansund.

Moreover, the relation between our peoples are also a matter of faith and values, being one as churches together. The Porvoo agreement between the Church of England and the Church of Norway, and other Anglican and Lutheran churches in our regions, was first signed in Nidaros cathedral in 1996. I had the privilege to prepare the document for decision in our General Synod, and I have seen how this communion has become a living reality in our churches. It has got a significant and tangible expression in the relationship between the Diocese of Newcastle and the Diocese of Møre. It is a special privilege to witness this moment of signing a renewed commitment to this relationship here at Grip, in the ocean, where we meet today. Where heaven and earth meet.

The Gospel reading of today from John 17 is the end of a remarkable prayer, formed as a poem, describing relations between heaven and earth in unique, beautiful but also challenging terms. To be one as Church is to be included in the unity in the Triune God.

To be Church is to be an expression of this unity between heaven and earth, and of the unity and fellowship God has created all human beings to experience. Heaven and earth, the divine and the human, come together in Christ – and therefore in the Church as the Body of Christ. This prayer is formulated and placed in the Gospel of John to summarize the ministry and life of Jesus on earth, and his relations to his disciples for the time to come. It is expressed before the suffering, crucifixion, death – and resurrection. These are not words expressing pious wishes “in the sky”, but words describing and creating relations of love that are stronger than sin and death.

The words bring us to the life of Jesus as God and human being. But quite remarkable, Jesus also refers here to his role in the work of creation. Jesus Christ is at the heart of God’s creation, from the very beginning, through his ministry on earth, through the ages – also our time. The Ascension Day reminds us of this.

Even more, the Ascension Day is a day of Christ, the crucified and risen Christ, it brings us closer to both heaven and earth. We get closer to the glory of God and to the wounds of earth, as well, where human beings are wounded and deprived of their humanness and human dignity in wars going on as we speak. Christ brings us closer to mother earth, suffering from human overuse of its resources, not at least in the great oceans.

We need days like these, places like these, moments like these, to see ourselves as living from the great gifts of God in creation and in the Church. We need these moments to be grateful, but also to be the accountable stewards of God’s gifts to the whole world. We need them to open our eyes and our minds to the presence of God among us, and to the calling God gives us and renews for us. Because heaven and earth meet, even today.

Glory be to the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be - for ever and ever. Amen