

The Ascension in Hebrews

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The theology of the Ascension of Jesus is explained in the Epistle to the Hebrews. We do not know who the author of the epistle was. It is obvious, though, that the author was a Christian who urged his fellow Christians to remain true to Jesus Christ. In the early Church there was a struggle concerning how much of the Jewish Law Christians had to obey. A number of early Christians were tempted to return to their Jewish roots.

The author of Hebrews explained how much better Jesus sacrifice was than those offered by the Temple priests. I quote from the epistle: "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption(Heb 9:11-13)

Jesus shed his own blood on the cross, expressing his obedient love for the Father and his unconditional love for us. That love from Jesus, the Son of God, atoned for the sins of Jesus' brothers and sisters whom we are. Through Jesus we have been invited to be candidates for eternal life. Jesus' elevation into heaven reminds us that after his death, he entered into heaven with a body like ours. Essentially heaven is God's presence of which the Jewish Temple was a symbol. Jesus entered the reality rather than the symbol. As our brother, he made us eligible to join him. We say that he opened the gates of heaven for all of us.

In contrasting the Temple sacrifices to that of Jesus, the author of Hebrews reminded us that the priests of the Old Testament first offered sacrifices for their own sins and then for those of the people. Jesus, on the other hand, is God's Son, through whom God speaks, through whom God created the world. The author of Hebrews concludes: "Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our belief. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help." (4: 14-16)

Jesus entered heaven as our priest. The Letter to the Hebrews concludes: Jesus "because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. (7:24-26)

When we pray, we never pray alone. Always in any kind of prayer offered to God, Christ is praying, interceding, for us, and with us. Our prayers are always powerful because they are taken up into the eternal prayer of Jesus Christ, our high priest. At each Mass we join the prayer of Jesus and the angels to thank God for our blessings and to praise the Lord for his goodness.