

Ascension Thursday 21st May

The Ascension is described twice by Luke.

In Luke Ch.24 50-52

50 When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. 51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. 52 Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

and in Acts 1 6-12

6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away.

A site on the Mount of Olives (Olivet) was identified as the site of this event from at least 384. A wealthy Roman woman named Poimonia had a church built there in 390. It was destroyed in 614, then rebuilt, but all that remains is the **Aedicule (Shrine)** section.



This area has been under Islamic control for many centuries, but on the Feast of the Ascension – 40 days after Easter – each year the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem is permitted to celebrate with a procession and liturgy there. The photograph below shows the 2019 celebration.



From at least the 6th century the Ascension also appears in art. A very early, and particularly striking, example is that in the **Rabbula Gospels**, a richly illuminated book written and painted in Syria around 586.



The artist has combined the Acts account with Ezekiel's vision in Ch 1. Notice the "four beasts" with wings, wheels and eyes below Christ's feet, and as described by the prophet

Ezekiel 1:28 Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Christ is flanked by angels proffering homage with veiled hands, the standard way of approaching powerful individuals.

The apostles, - including here Paul, with book in hand - astonished, gaze and point, but Mary, calm in her central position, raises her hands in the posture used for prayer (the so-called "orant" pose). All of these features, not present in the Luke accounts, point to an already evolved understanding of the Ascension as the cosmic spiritual enthronement of Christ, emphasized by the little figures of the sun and moon at the top.

Giotto's scene of the Ascension in the Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel in Padua (1304-1306) is saturated in heavenly blue – the most expensive colour known to artists at that time, since it was made from lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan and also required extensive preparation. Giotto's fresco is also unconventional in showing Christ in profile, rising out of the frame, as prophets, patriarchs and angels worship.



In the moving music/drama performance "**Passion, Lament, Glory**" at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne just before Easter 2017, the aerialist Tim Ruddy, after bidding farewell to the men and women playing Jesus' followers, ascended a rope, disappearing into the blackness of the great vault of the church.



You can see a recording of the whole event at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=XzF-jXcOg4g&feature=emb_logo