

ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST TO HEAVEN

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Picture: Icon of the Ascension of the Christ. The author is famous iconographer Theophanes the Greek.

The feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ belongs to the movable feasts because the date of its celebration changes every year depending on the date of Easter-Pascha. It falls on the fortieth day after Pascha, that is, it is always celebrated on the Thursday of the sixth week after Pascha. Earlier on, this feast was celebrated together with the feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles, but similarly to the feast of the Nativity of Christ, from the fourth century onwards, it is celebrated independently, exactly according to the words from the Acts of the Apostles, that is on the fortieth day after Pascha. This feast was one of

the first feasts that the Christians celebrated. It began already in the second century.

We learn of this event especially from the Acts of the Apostles. The text of the Gospel and Acts states: „And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen – And when he

had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey" (Luke 24:50-53 – Acts 1:9-12, KJV).

This Feast of our Lord is celebrated with the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, which is conducted on the day of the Feast and preceded by the Matins service. A Great Vespers is conducted on the evening before the day of the Feast. Scripture readings for the Feast are the following: At Vespers: Isaiah 2:2-3, 62:10-63:9; Zechariah 14:1,4,8-11. At the Orthros (Matins) Mark 16:9-20; At the Divine Liturgy: Acts 1:1-12; Luke 24:36-53.

The ascension of God, who has a human body is at the same time a feast for rejoicing and a feast of sorrow. The God-man Christ departs from his disciples and his Mother, but at the same time promises the appearance of a Comforter-a Spirit of Advice and at the same time announces his second coming at the end of ages. The sorrow however is quickly replaced by happiness, with which the apostles returned to Jerusalem.

The earliest depictions of the feast are the depictions stemming from the fifth century from Rome and miniatures from early Christian Gospels. The iconography of the feast has not changed throughout the centuries.

The composition of the icon is divided into two parts. In the upper part there is the Saviour in the form of a Pantocrator, and around him there is a circular mandorla (glory), which is held from both sides by two (sometimes more) angels. The Saviour is ascending without their help so that we understand that he is the true God-man. His vestment is not traditional that is blue and red but shinningly white and gold, which emphasises his glorification.

Jesus blesses with his right hand and in his left hand he holds a scroll, that is he is the source of *blahodat* or bliss and blessing, but also at the same time salvific teaching. The mentioned scroll held the words: „All power is given

unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). The scroll which is held by the Saviour is a symbol symbolising the teacher. The fact that Jesus Christ on the icon is holding a scroll and at the same time is blessing, expresses the fact, that Christ even after his Ascension to heaven did not cease to be the source of *blahodat* and of the true teaching. His teaching ability and the giving of *blahodat* through blessing merely changed their form after the Ascension. They are now given through the servants of Christ, but their source remains Christ.

The Glory-mandorla, in which the ascending Christ is located, „is held“ by two or more flying angels, which symbolise the majesty of God and his power. On some icons instead of the glory the angels hold a cloud. The angels bearing of Christs glory does not mean, that Christs habitation in glory depends on the angels, but that the main role of the angels is to, together with the rest of creation, to glorify Gods goodness, love, holiness, justice, mercy and all the other characteristics of Gods character and acts and in this way to promote the knowledge of his glory.



Sometimes the angels on the icons are depicted as attentively observing the ascending Christ in a state of deep and constant prayer, or they are playing the trumpets according to the words of the Psalm: „God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet“ (Psalms 46:6). The upper part therefore depicts the event of ascension of Christ onto heaven.

Sometimes in the lower part of the icon, the Church is depicted- Mother of God and the apostles. At the bottom of the mountain in the centre of the icon the Mother of God

is depicted as the symbol of the Church in the position of the Orans, that is with

her hands lifted to prayer. Around her there are two angels in white garments- both of which point to Christ the Saviour – the only head of the Church and they are speaking to the apostles (Acts 1:11). These are located in two six membered groups on both sides of the Mother of God. The Apostles symbolically represent the two columns of the Church, those that are spreading the message of the Gospels and the teachers of their successors the bishops. The most interesting detail is that on most icons of the Ascension the apostles do not have a halo depicted, which is the expression of the fact that they have not received the *blahodat* bliss of the Holy Spirit-Comforter yet, which according to the words of the Saviour was to appear on the day of Pentecost.

The halo on the icon is on the Saviour, the Mother of God, and on the depicted angels. On the top of the Mount of Olives there are the footprints of the feet of the Saviour, since his ascension was truly from the earth to heaven.

The Angels located in the proximity of the Mother of God, point to Jesus Christ. On some icons, they hold two scrolls, where the words are written, which were pronounced when Christ was ascending to heaven. On one of them the words are, „Men of Galilee why are you standing and looking to the heavens?“ and on the other there are the words „These Jesus who ascended to heaven from you, will come in such a way, as you have seen him enter heaven.“.

The Holy Scripture does not recall that at the event of the Ascension of Christ to heaven the mother of God was present. But the Holy tradition testifies to this, and also this is confirmed by the simple fact that the Mother of God accompanied her Son to the event of Ascension. Her position directly beneath Christ presents the axis of the icon, her hands raised in a prayerful position, which should be adopted towards Christ by any believing person. In difference to the apostles who stare at the departing Christ, the face of the Mother of God is peaceful. She was the first to understand, that the departure of her Son is not final, and that he will be with them in another form.

The icon has one inaccuracy of a historical nature. There are twelve apostles, even though during the Ascension of Christ they could not have been that many. Judas committed suicide and Mathew was not yet added to the

twelve. The iconographers, supplemented the apostles with Paul, who at that time was in opposition to Christ's successors. It is a metahistorical view of the icon, which emphasises the symbolical and theological meaning of the event. The apostle Paul adds to the fullness of the apostles and their service, he symbolically represents the Church here from the pagans and he is here also, because he himself during his journey to Damascus saw Christ Jesus himself.

The presence of the Mother of God and the apostles, that is the Church on the icon points to whom, Christ during his ascension had bequeathed his truth, the fullness of his blessing and to whom he had promised the descent of the Holy Spirit. The icon of the Ascension of Christ confirms that the Church is the bearer, inheritor, and protector of all the given gifts, and is prepared to give them to all, who become her living members.

On the background behind the apostles and the Mother of God we can see the summits of the hills with roots of trees. These hills represent the Mount of Olives, where the Ascension of Christ took place. This hill is located to the east of Jerusalem and was filled with olives in earlier times.

The icon of the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven in Orthodox Churches is not found only on iconostases in the so-called feast register, but also on the wall, which is located at the beginning of the altar part of the church above or behind the iconostasis.

SUMMARY

The feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ belongs to the movable feasts because the date of its celebration changes every year depending on the date of Easter-Pascha. This feast was celebrated together with the feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles. It was one of the first feasts that the Christians celebrated. The earliest depictions of the feast are the depictions stemming from the fifth century. The icon is divided into two parts. In the upper part there is the Saviour in the form of a Pantocrator, in the lower part of the icon, the Church is depicted-Mother of God and the apostles. Icon of Ascension contains many symbols, which the Church expresses its dogmatic

teaching about God's iconomy that was made by all the Holy Trinity, especially the God-man Jesus Christ.

Troparion — Tone 4

O Christ God, You have ascended in Glory, / Granting joy to Your disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. / Through the blessing they were assured / That You are the Son of God, / The Redeemer of the world!

Kontakion — Tone 6

When You had fulfilled the dispensation for our sake, / and united earth to heaven: / You ascended in glory, O Christ our God, / not being parted from those who love You, / but remaining with them and crying: / "I am with you and no one will be against you!"

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Abstract

In this article we are approaching the orthodox iconographic view of the feast of Ascension of Jesus Christ and its importance in teaching of the Church about the salvation of man. This iconomy is closely related to the teaching of the God's Son who fulfilled the Father's will and implemented this plan. The completion of this work was the ascension to the heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Key words

Jesus Christ, Ascension, Iconography, symbolism