

Feast of the Ascension

This article is about the Feast of the Ascension. For the feast 6 weeks before during Holy Week, also known as Holy Thursday, see **Maunder Thursday**.

The **Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ**,^[1] also known as **Ascension Thursday**, **Holy Thursday**, or **Ascension Day**,^{[2][3]} commemorates the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven. It is one of the ecumenical feasts (i.e., universally celebrated) of Christian churches, ranking with the feasts of the Passion, of Easter, and Pentecost. Ascension Day is traditionally celebrated on a Thursday, the fortieth day of Easter (following the count given in Acts 1:3), although some Christian denominations have moved the observance to the following Sunday.

1 History

The observance of this feast is of great antiquity. Eusebius seems to hint at the celebration of it in the 4th century.^[4] At the beginning of the 5th century, St. Augustine says that it is of Apostolic origin, and he speaks of it in a way that shows it was the universal observance of the Church long before his time. Frequent mention of it is made in the writings of St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and in the *Constitution of the Apostles*. The *Pilgrimage of Aetheria* speaks of the vigil of this feast and of the feast itself, as they were kept in the church built over the grotto in Bethlehem in which Christ was born.^[5] It may be that prior to the 5th century the fact narrated in the Gospels was commemorated in conjunction with the feast of Easter or Pentecost. Some believe that the much-disputed forty-third decree of the Synod of Elvira (c. 300) condemning the practice of observing a feast on the fortieth day after Easter and neglecting to keep Pentecost on the fiftieth day, implies that the proper usage of the time was to commemorate the Ascension along with Pentecost. Representations of the mystery are found in diptychs and frescoes dating as early as the 5th century.

2 Western

The Latin terms used for the feast, *ascensio* and, occasionally, *ascensa*, signify that Christ was raised up by his own powers, and it is from these terms that the holy day gets its name. In the Book of Common Prayer of the Anglican Communion, "Holy Thursday" is listed as an

other name for Ascension Day.^{[6][2][3]} In Western Christianity, the earliest possible date is April 30, the latest possible date is June 3. In Roman Catholicism, the Ascension of the Lord is a Holy Day of Obligation and in the Anglican Communion, Holy Thursday is a Principal Feast. The three days before Ascension Thursday are sometimes referred to as the Rogation days and the previous Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter (or the Fifth Sunday *after* Easter), as Rogation Sunday. Ascension has a vigil and, since the 15th century, an octave, which is set apart for a novena of preparation for Pentecost.^[7]

2.1 Sunday observance

The Roman Catholic Church in a number of countries that do not observe the feast as a public holiday has obtained permission from the Vatican to move observance of the Feast of the Ascension from the traditional Thursday to the following Sunday, the Sunday before Pentecost. Similarly, The United Methodist Church allows the traditional celebration on Holy Thursday to be moved to Sunday.^[8] This is in keeping with a trend to move Holy Days of Obligation from weekdays to Sunday, to encourage more Christians to observe feasts considered important.^{[9][10]} The decision to move a feast is made by the bishops of an ecclesiastical province, i.e. an archbishop and the neighbouring bishops. The switch to Sunday was made in 1992 by the church in Australia;^[11] before 1996 in parts of Europe;^[12] in 1996 in Ireland;^[13] before 1998 in Canada and parts of the western United States;^[9] in many other parts in the United States from 1999;^[9] and in England and Wales from 2007.^[14] The U.S. ecclesiastical provinces which retain Thursday observance in 2009 are Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Omaha, and Philadelphia.^[15] When celebrated on Sunday, the earliest possible date is May 3, and the latest is June 6.

3 Eastern and Oriental Orthodox

In the Eastern Church this feast is known in Greek as *Analepsis*, the "taking up", and also as the *Episozomene*, the "salvation from on high", denoting that by ascending into his glory Christ completed the work of our redemption. Ascension is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox liturgical year.

The feast is always observed with an All-night vigil. The



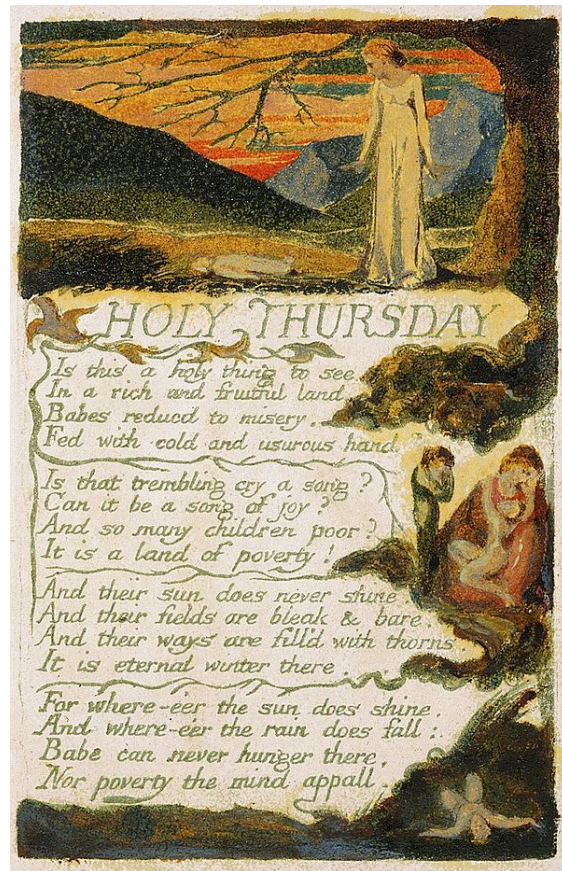
Liturgy during the Feast of the Ascension in a Mumbai Syrian Orthodox Church

day before is the Apodosis (leave-taking) of Easter (i.e., the last day of the Feast of Easter). The *Paroemia* (Old Testament readings) at Vespers on the eve of the Feast are Isaiah 2:2-3; Isaiah 62:10-63:3, 63:7-9; and Zechariah 14:1-4, 14:8-11. At the Divine Liturgy, the Epistle is Acts 1:1-12, and the Gospel is Luke 24:36-53. Ascension Thursday also commemorates the Holy Georgian Martyrs of Persia (17th–18th centuries).

Ascension has an Afterfeast of eight days. The Sunday after Ascension is the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. This council formulated the Nicene Creed up to the words, "He (Jesus) ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end." The Afterfeast ends on the following Friday, the Friday before Pentecost. The next day is appropriately a Saturday of the Dead (general commemoration of all faithful departed).

The Eastern Orthodox Church uses a different method of calculating the date of Easter, so the Eastern Orthodox commemoration of Ascension will usually be after the western observance (either one week, or four weeks, or five weeks later; but occasionally on the same day). The earliest possible date for the feast is May 13 (of the western calendar), and the latest possible date is June 17. Some of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, however, observe Ascension on the same date as the Western Churches.^[16]

4 Customs



William Blake's 1794 poem Holy Thursday, i.e. Ascension Day, from his work *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. This image depicts copy F of the illustration currently held by the Yale Center for British Art.^[17]

Certain customs or rituals were connected with the liturgy of this feast, such as the blessing of beans and grapes after the Commemoration of the Dead in the Canon of the Mass, the blessing of first fruits, afterwards done on Rogation Days, the blessing of a candle, the wearing of mitres by deacon and subdeacon, the extinguishing of the paschal candle, and triumphal processions with torches and banners outside the churches to commemorate the entry of Christ into heaven.

The antiquarian Daniel Rock records the English custom of carrying at the head of the procession the banner bearing the device of the lion and at the foot the banner of the dragon, to symbolize the triumph of Christ in his ascension over the evil one (and can also be interpreted by analogy as the triumph of England over Wales). In some churches the scene of the Ascension was vividly reproduced by elevating the figure of Christ above the altar through an opening in the roof of the church. In others, whilst the figure of Christ was made to ascend, that of the devil was made to descend.

In England it was once common for churches to "beat the bounds" on this day, and some continue the custom (e.g.

the church of St Michael at the North Gate in Oxford). Members of the parish walk round the parish boundaries, marking boundary stones (e.g. by writing on them in chalk) and hitting them with sticks. According to some, it was once the young boys of the parish that were hit with sticks instead of the stones. Knowledge of the parish boundaries was once important, since churches had certain duties such as the care of children born out of wedlock in the parish. One of the purposes served by beating the bounds was that of warning the young men of the parish that any sexual misbehaviour ought to take place with women who lived outside the parish.

In some countries (at least in Austria, Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany (since the 1930s), Haiti, Iceland, Indonesia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Namibia, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Vanuatu) it is a public holiday; Germany also holds its Fathers' Day on the same date.

Coinciding with the liturgical feast is the annual commemoration by the Christian labour movement (especially syndical, in Belgium) of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* issued by the Roman Catholic Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891.

In Venice the ceremony of the Wedding with the Sea was traditionally celebrated on the Feast of the Ascension, while in Florence the Feast was observed by having a dove slide down a string from the high altar of the cathedral to ignite a large decorative container filled with fireworks in front of the main entrance of the cathedral.

In Portugal on "Wheatstalk Thursday", small bundles of poppies and wheatstalks are picked in the fields and placed at home until next year, for good fortune.

5 Music

Johann Sebastian Bach composed several cantatas and the *Ascension Oratorio* to be performed in church services on the feast day. He first performed *Wer da gläubet und getauft wird*, BWV 37, on 18 May 1724, *Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein*, BWV 128, on 10 May 1725, *Gott fährt auf mit Jauchzen*, BWV 43, on 30 May 1726 and the oratorio, *Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen*, BWV 11, on 19 May 1735.

6 See also

- Ascension of Jesus
- Ascension of Jesus in Christian art
- Feast of the Transfiguration

7 References

- [1] "Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ". Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. 2015. Retrieved 14 May 2015. The Feast of the Ascension of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ is celebrated each year on the fortieth day after the Great and Holy Feast of Pascha (Easter). Since the date of Pascha changes each year, the date of the Feast of the Ascension changes. The Feast is always celebrated on a Thursday.
- [2] Thomas Ignatius M. Forster (1828). *Circle of the Seasons, and Perpetual key to the Calendar and Almanack*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 1 April 2012. Holy Thursday or Ascension Day. Festum Ascensionis. Le Jeudi Saint d' Ascension.
- [3] George Soane (1847). *New Curiosities of Literature and Book of the Months*. Churton. Retrieved 1 April 2012. Ascension Day, or Holy Thursday. This, as the name sufficiently implies, is the anniversary of Christ's Ascension.
- [4] Eusebius 'Life of Constantine' IV.54
- [5] Louis Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution* (London, 1903), 491-515.
- [6] Church of England, "A Table of the Vigils, Fasts and Days of Abstinence to be observed in the year"
- [7] "Rules to Order the Christian Year". Church of England. 2015. Retrieved 14 May 2015. Rogation Days are the three days before Ascension Day, when prayer is offered for God's blessing on the fruits of the earth and on human labour. The nine days after Ascension Day until Pentecost are days of prayer and preparation to celebrate the outpouring of the Spirit.
- [8] Hickman, Hoyt L. (1 July 2011). *United Methodist Altars*. Abingdon Press. p. 52. ISBN 9781426730696.
- [9] Ascension Day is Moving Michael Kwatera, OSB. Office of Worship, Diocese of Saint Cloud.
- [10] On the following Sunday in some areas: see Sunday observance
- [11] "Column 8". *Sydney Morning Herald*. 14 May 1992. p. 1.
- [12] "Church holy day changes sought". *The Irish Times*. 10 October 1996. p. 5. Retrieved 2009-06-11.
- [13] Pollak, Andy (17 October 1996). "Holy days moved to following Sunday". *The Irish Times*. p. 7. Retrieved 2009-06-11.
- [14] The Spectator's Notes: Charles Moore's reflections on the week, Charles Moore *The Spectator*, Wednesday, 7th May 2008
- [15] Is Ascension a Holy Day of Obligation? Scott P. Richert, About.com
- [16] "The Church in Malankara switched entirely to the Gregorian calendar in 1953, following Encyclical No. 620 from Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem I, dt. December 1952." *Calendars of the Syriac Orthodox Church*. Retrieved 22 April 2009.

- [17] Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (eds.). "Songs of Innocence and of Experience, copy F, object 38 (Bentley 33, Erdman 33, Keynes 33) "HOLY THURSDAY"". William Blake Archive. Retrieved September 26, 2013.

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