

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 16 May 2010

The Ascension of Christ

Acts 1, 6-14; John 17, 1-11.

The account we have received of the life and work of Jesus comes to us from the New Testament writers who of course wrote in the light of their understanding of the structure of the world – a three tier universe, where heaven was in the sky and hell under the earth. Our creeds in turn give this world view vivid concrete expression in the language they use about Jesus the Son of God ‘Who for us men and our salvation came down from the heavens, was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became man, was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell, rose again on the third day and ascended into the heavens and sits at the right hand of the Father’. The ascension of Jesus which we celebrate today is contained within that framework. In our literal-minded times, atheists take the chance to pour ridicule and Christians are embarrassed.

However the NT writers, unlike some of their modern commentators, always understood that the language they used about the action of God in Jesus was symbolic, not literal: it directed the attention of Christians towards a hidden level of reality. Karen Armstrong illustrates this with the walk to Emmaus, where two disciples encounter a stranger whose words ‘cause their hearts to burn within them’. Only when the stranger blesses bread with them do they realise that the stranger was Jesus himself ‘but their eyes had been held from recognising him’. The story shows how the early Christians experienced Christ’s resurrection; they did not have a simplistic idea of his corpse walking out of a tomb. Instead Paul (who does not appear to know about the empty tomb at all), says that they no longer know Jesus ‘in the flesh’ but would find him in one another, in scripture and in the ritual meals they shared together.

Tragically for Christianity, the symbolic language of the New Testament and the creeds quickly came to be understood not as symbolic, but as

literal statements. This led the church into the false position of denying all the discoveries of science, first astronomy, then palaeontology and evolutionary biology. We can now see how deeply damaging this has been (and remains) to the Christian cause. But we also need to understand how a reduction of the biblical revelation to statements of literal fact impoverishes our own understanding and spiritual growth.

There is a widespread misunderstanding that before you can become a Christian, you have to believe a lot of things. 'Six impossible things before breakfast', said Lewis Carroll, perhaps after attending early communion! The belief requirement is a modern heresy – it certainly has nothing to do with the teaching of Jesus. For Jesus, faith is not a matter of belief, but about trust, commitment and practical living. Karen Armstrong (The Case for God p.99), describes how Cyril, the Bishop of Jerusalem in 350 a.d. introduced new members to his church. They had to fast, pray and receive instruction in the basic factual message of the church. They were not required to believe anything in advance of baptism because the deeper truths of Christianity would only make sense in the context of the transforming experience of commitment. After they had been baptised they were invited to recite the creed – a statement not of belief, but of commitment to the God that had become a reality in their lives. The culmination of their baptism (by triple total immersion) was the cry *Pisteuo*, meaning I commit myself – akin to the 'I will' of the marriage service. Theodore, another fourth century bishop in Turkey, explains what it meant to be baptised:

When you say Pisteuo before God, you show that you will remain steadfastly with him, that you will never separate yourself from him and that you will think it higher than anything else to be and live with him and to conduct yourself in a way that is in harmony with his commandments'.

Christianity is a way of life, not a set of beliefs. The bible is not just a text, but an activity: you do not merely read it, you have to do it. With this lengthy introduction I come at last to talk about the ascension! We miss its meaning if we think of it as a literal event: it is a symbol, drawing our attention to a deeper spiritual reality.

People who say that for them, Christ is ascended, commit themselves to the lordship of Christ in their own lives and in the whole world of people and things. The implications of giving that allegiance are life-changing. Jesus claimed that it is possible to transcend the limitations of being

human. He commanded us to die to the self, to the world which is passing away, and to change our manner of living because the kingdom of God was within our grasp (at hand). In history, a man proclaimed the possibility of transcending history and the limitations of the human condition (Don Cupitt). He invites us, in history like he was, human like he was, to verify his claim in practice. To say that 'he is ascended' means saying yes to all that.

For the early Christians, the ascension was not a reversal of misfortune—a belated restoration of Jesus' glory and divinity; not at all. It was the recognition that true glory and true divinity consisted in the way he had lived. That 'way' revealed to them and to us the true glory of God. We see this in one of the very earliest Christian writings, a hymn quoted by Paul in the letter he wrote to the Church at Philippi about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus:

He was in the form of God; yet he laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth and in the depths—and every tongue acclaim, "Jesus Christ is Lord", to the glory of God the Father.

But there is more. The ascension of Jesus to the Father shows that there is a limit to our knowledge of the mystery which is God. The ascension was the moment when Christ 'transcended our conceptual grasp and became unknowable'. At his ascension, Jesus was hidden in the cloud that received him and taken into a realm that is beyond the reach of the intellect. In the words of Paul, he is 'far above any name that can be named (Ephesians 1.21). The Ascension therefore marks the limits of our knowledge of God and compels us to acknowledge the mystery which is at the heart of our existence and identity. We wait on God, who will continue to reveal more of his Word to us. But we also know that God is on our side, because the love which Jesus revealed to us ascended to be at the heart of God. In the traditional formula, 'He intercedes for us'. So the God whom we worship is to us both a mystery and a comforter.

God is 'Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes' and at the same time 'the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind'. Our task now is not to speculate about the nature or location of God - the writer of Acts gives that short shrift: "Men of Galilee, why stand there looking into the sky?" Our task is to live confidently in the power which the Holy Spirit gives us; to bear witness for him in the manner of our living, so playing our part in changing the places where we live that we and our friends will experience in some way the presence of Jesus coming back as mysteriously as we have seen him go.

The collect for today catches some of this:

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen

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