

THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

Daniel 7: 9-14

Acts 1: 1 – 11

Luke 24: 44 – 53

I speak to you + in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One thing that strikes me about the account of the Ascension that is given to us in the first chapter of Acts is the question that is addressed to the disciples by the two men who are dressed in white. ‘Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’ On one hand, we cannot blame the disciples: it is very true that when we think of Ascension, we remember and commemorate that glorious date in history when our Lord was lifted up and disappeared in a cloud as he was taken into heaven.

This cloud, of course, was no ordinary cloud; the two men in white give us a hint about this when they say, ‘This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’ No, this cloud into which Jesus disappeared was a manifestation of God’s glory, not unlike the cloud that enveloped Christ, Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration.¹ This extraordinary cloud that accompanied our Lord in his Ascension will be seen again in when he returns to earth and comes in his Father’s glory with his angels.² Viewed this way, we can say that the Ascension of Jesus was both a display of the splendour and glory of God’s *current* kingdom as well as a display of the splendour and glory of his *coming* Kingdom.

The Ascension draws us into the mystery of God, and as we contemplate it, our words begin to fail us. Our human language is incapable of adequately speaking of, and describing, the majesty of that divine event. When Christ ascended to heaven,

¹ Cf. Matt 17: 1 – 9.

² Cf. Matt 16: 27 – 28.

the human life of the Son (in which God made himself visible and tangible) disappeared from the human world and was somehow absorbed into the endless life of God.

But the miracle of Ascension is also that *our* humanity, all of it, yours and mine, goes with Jesus in his Ascension. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, we are reminded that Christ is the head of the church, ‘which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way.’ At his Ascension our Lord rose in his perfect humanity, and he took with him our humanity, including all of the difficult, resistant and unpleasant bits of our humanity. He took our humanity with him to the heart of the Father, who in his love waits to heal and transform us.

I wonder: how does God heal and transform us? He does so by the gift and presence of his Holy Spirit, who is promised both in our reading from Acts and in the reading from Luke’s Gospel. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables us not only to be a new kind of person, a person who is healed and transformed; the Holy Spirit gives us the life of Jesus. For each one of us today, the Ascension of Christ is a celebration of God’s capacity through his Holy Spirit to reach into those parts of our humanity that are far from glorious, that are rebellious and troubled and broken, to breathe life into them, to take them home, to drop them into the fire of Pentecost and melt them and recast them. This is just one of the glorious benefits of the promise of the Holy Spirit.

A second benefit of the promise of the Holy Spirit is that we Christians will receive, as our Lord put it, *power* so that we can be his witnesses to the end of the earth. Having received the breath of his divine life, we, like Jesus will show and spread the love of God so that the world may be brought home to the Father. We, the Christian Church who are Christ’s body; we, who are the ‘fulness of him who fills everything in every way’; are called to reach out to our world and to see and hear with Christ’s

eyes and ears. We are called to see and hear what *he* can do; and to speak of this to the world with sacrificial love and astonishing boldness.

And this leads me back to my starting point. I mentioned a moment ago that I was struck by the fact that in Acts 1, the two men in white asked the disciples, “Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?”

William Temple, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s, wrote: “The Ascension of Christ is his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from earth, but his constant *presence* everywhere on earth.”

I’m reminded of a play written by John Masefield, Poet Laureate of Great Britain from 1930 to 1967. The play is called *The Trial of Jesus*; and in it, one of the characters, Longinus, has a conversation with Procula, the wife of Pontius Pilate. Speaking of Jesus, Procula asks, “Do you think he is dead?” To which Longinus replies, “No, lady, I don’t.” When asked, “Then where is he?” Longinus replies “Let loose in all the world, lady.”

On the Day of Ascension, we realise that our Lord who accepted to be limited in time and space is now able to be with all peoples at all times and in all places.

That is why, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the point of the coming of the Spirit (which we will soon celebrate at Pentecost), is not necessarily that the Spirit will comfort us in our loss of Jesus and take us to be with him. The point is that the Spirit is given so that through the work of the Church, the kingdom may indeed *come on earth* as in heaven. The kingdom *will* come as the Church, energised by the Spirit, goes out into the world. The Church, which at times will be vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, but always celebrating – is

called to go out into the world so that the life of Christ may be manifest. The Church paves the way for the coming of the kingdom of God.

On this Day of Ascension, we may indeed want to spend a moment looking up into the sky, just as the disciples did; but may we also be encouraged to look in the direction of the world, where the message of Jesus leads us.

On this Day of Ascension, may we now turn our faces *outwards*, and not upwards; may we be emboldened and empowered to look beyond all things that are familiar to us and comfortable. In the words of William Temple, how might we help liberate Christ into his constant presence in our world?

Amen.