

Sermon on the Ascension – 21.05.2020

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The Ascension, coming forty days after we celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Sunday, is a part of the story of Jesus that we often ignore. Every time we say the Apostles' Creed together, as one of the things we believe about Jesus, we affirm: 'He ascended into heaven'. But how often do we think about what that actually means?

I have to confess that I haven't spent much time pondering Jesus' ascension, especially when compared with the time I've given to thinking about his crucifixion and resurrection. That's probably because I struggle so much with the image the term conjures up for me: Jesus rising up, maybe like Superman, until he disappears into the clouds.

For most artists who have struggled with depicting the Ascension, Jesus is pictured as rising up from the earth into the sky. It's only in more recent images, now that we know that heaven is not literally 'up there' (because we've been "up there") that artists have tried to find other ways of picturing the Ascension, and even then most of them still have a sense of Jesus being in the sky. I think my favourite image, and the one that troubles me most, is the sixteenth-century painting by the German Hans Suess von Kulmbach which has Christ disappearing out of the top of the picture with only his feet still present. It's a hard image to take seriously now that we know that creation is not made up, as was thought at the time, of the three layers of Heaven-Earth-Hell. As one commentator has written, 'We do not believe that Jesus ended his earthly ministry with the equivalent of a rocket launch, rising a few hundred miles above the earth. Nor do we think Jesus was the first to be "beamed up," to use the term made so familiar by the television series Star Trek..

So, what are we doing today, if we're not remembering Jesus literally heading up into space? Why do we affirm the Ascension in the creeds?

Interestingly, there are only two descriptions of the Ascension in the Christian Scriptures, and both were written by St. Luke. The Ascension is the last thing that Luke describes in the Gospel that carries his name, and the first thing he describes in the Acts of the Apostles. Descriptions of the Ascension are the transition point between Luke talking about Jesus' life, and Luke talking about the mission of Jesus' followers empowered by the Holy Spirit. These two stories, are each slightly different. In the Gospel description of the Ascension it seems to be happening very close to the resurrection, immediately after Jesus' appears to 'the eleven and their companions'. It's also very short; Luke writes: 'Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.' Luke's second description of the Ascension, at the beginning of Acts, is longer and more detailed. In this description the Ascension is said to happen forty days after the resurrection; Jesus commissions his followers, rather than simply blessing them; and

we have an appearance from two men in white robes. These are probably meant to be the same two men in dazzling robes who spoke to the women at the tomb on Easter morning. At that time they'd asked: 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' Now they ask: 'Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?' In both cases these two men remind Jesus' followers not to standing gazing on the past but to look towards the future.

The reading we heard today from the Acts of the Apostles isn't just a description of the Ascension. At the beginning of his second book, Luke recapitulates his entire Gospel so that his reader, Theophilus, is in the right mood for the new tale he's going to tell. Luke's getting Theophilus ready for a change in subject, from the story of Jesus' life on earth, to the story of the mission of Jesus' followers. So he summarises Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; reminds Theophilus of Jesus' command to his disciples to await the coming of the Spirit in Jerusalem; and answers that vital question: does Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the kingdom of God mean the restoration of the kingdom of Israel? Jesus' answer to that is, of course, not in the political form that the disciples might want. He's not commissioning them to rule over an Israel freed from Roman occupation. He's commissioning them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth once he himself has gone to the Father.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned three times in this short introduction: during his ministry Jesus gave instructions 'through the Holy Spirit to the apostles'; during the forty post-resurrection days he spent with them Jesus promised that they would 'be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'; and as he leaves them he tells them again: 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you'. Luke is preparing us for the entrance of another manifestation of God among humanity, for the next Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Today, the Feast of the Ascension, marks the end of Jesus' time on earth. Next week, the Feast of Pentecost, marks the coming of the Spirit. It's a bit like a relay race in which the baton is passed. Jesus has left the scene and the Holy Spirit has entered and Luke's second book tells his readers about those who have received the Holy Spirit, the way in which the followers of Jesus witnessed to him in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, and their astonishing discovery that the Holy Spirit baptised Gentiles as well as Jews. But this new focus doesn't mean that Christ has been replaced by the Christian community that became the Church. The Church does not replace Christ; instead Christ is present with the community in a new way, through the Holy Spirit. It's one of the mysteries and gifts of the Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit are one. By ascending to the Father, Christ is able to relate to humanity beyond the limits in time and space. Jesus lived and died in one country, in one time, interacting with a small group of people. The Holy Spirit is accessible to all people, all the time. This is how we can be in relationship with Christ, despite living 2000 years after his birth on the other side of the world from his birthplace. We relate to God through the Holy Spirit, both the gift of God and God Godself, who is always with us.