

## THE ASCENSION

(Sunday 24 May 2009)

*Rev Dr Max Champion at St John's UCA Mt Waverley*

Lessons – Psalm 47; Luke 24:44-53

*He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Apostles / Nicene Creed*

These familiar words in the two great Ecumenical Creeds are most suitable for our inter-Church reflections on the Ascension, celebrated on Thursday in the Church year. Although we regularly affirm our faith in Christ's ascension in the Creeds, Sacraments ('The Lord prays for us at God's right hand') and hymns ('He sits at God's right hand till all his foes submit'), many are unsure what to make of it. As it evokes mixed reactions, it needs to be interpreted for our day.

Some don't see any problem. It's in the Bible! Some are sceptical. People who pride themselves on being 'rational' think Jesus' 'exit' is the product of pre-scientific mythology. 'As space-aged people, we know that if Jesus rose far enough into the sky, he did not get to heaven; he either got into orbit or sank into the infinite depths of space.' (Bishop John Shelby Spong in *The Guardian* 9/12/2000). Odd, isn't it, how the Biblicists and sceptics both think about the ascension so literally?

Others see nothing strange about a figure that 'descends' from heaven to earth and 'ascends' from earth to heaven. In reaction to sterile debates on reason versus superstition and science versus faith, the New Age movement is full of impersonal 'cosmic spirits' who 'come down' in order to reconnect us to our 'true selves' so that we may 'ascend' to the heavenly 'places' and become one with the universe. Jesus' is but one spiritual guru who has 'ascended'.

What are we to make of the ascension? From about the 3rd Century it became a special celebration like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. In places it was considered to be the 'crown' of all Christian festivals. According to St. Augustine:

'This is the festival which confirms the grace of all festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing ... his passion would have borne no fruit for us and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless.' (JG Davies, 'Ascension of Christ', *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Ed. A Richardson, 1969. p16.)

It was the pinnacle of Christian worship – the 'logical expression' of a genuinely spiritual faith in Christ's stunning victory at the cross and resurrection! It 'made sense' to celebrate his 'enthronement' as Sovereign Lord over all, including those hostile to God's good and gracious purposes.

How might we recover the significance of Christ's ascension in our own worship and thinking? We must start with Luke. He mentions it briefly at the end of his first volume (Luke) and more fully at the start of his second volume (Acts). Luke wasn't a pre-scientific fool but a profound theologian. He connects the 'Book of Christ' (Luke) which ends in Jerusalem and the 'Book of the Spirit' (Acts) which ends in Rome. The ascension of Jesus marks the end of his costly and victorious ministry through which Jewish hopes have been fulfilled (Jerusalem) and the beginning of the Church's mission to declare his continuing sovereignty among the nations (Rome).

Luke uses familiar words and images to convey a profound reality which cannot be easily conveyed! When Jesus ascends (and disappears to 'heaven' in 'a cloud') he is saying that, although Jesus' ministry as Son of God on 'earth' (including his resurrection appearances) has come to an end, it continues alongside his 'Father' 'in heaven'. What he has done in reconciling sinful humanity to God is accepted by his Father. Jesus does not stop exercising his influence but continues – in a consistent but different way – to be 'Lord' of all. When Jesus 'sits at God's right hand' his 'world reign', which is yet to be fully displayed as a reality, is already a reality 'in heaven', that is with God.

To summarise: Where the resurrection signifies that death and evil no longer have power over Christ, the ascension signifies that he is Lord of all.

This is magnificently stated in the creeds where past and present tenses of the verbs are used to express the finished work of his earthly ministry and the continuing reality of his heavenly mission. 'He ascended' means that his unique earthly ministry has reached its peak. 'He sits' means that his heavenly ministry is constant and continuous. These verbs and images are skillfully used to declare that the same Jesus who became flesh

for our sake ('descended') and triumphed over evil ('was raised') is the Lord who 'ascended' and filled the universe with the power of his goodness and mercy.

The correct question to ask of the ascension is not how such a thing could happen in a world of science (Spong) or whether Jesus is merely one among many spiritual figures who have ascended (New Age spiritualists), but what does it tell us about the continuing presence of God in Christ as the One who brings life and hope to the Church and world.

It doesn't help if we think of 'heaven' as a 'place' and the 'ascension' as an astronomical feat ahead of its time (Biblicists and Spong) or as a spiritual journey to the 'heavenly places'. We must think differently about the 'presence of Christ'. He is not in a particular geographical 'place' but in the 'space' where the will of God is done and evil and death do not hold sway!

- No matter what awful things are done by us or happen to us in our earthly 'space' Jesus Christ 'is seated at the right hand of God' as Sovereign Lord over the cosmos. As the One who in his earthly ministry has suffered evil and death and defeated their dread power in the cross and resurrection, he continues to judge sin and reconcile sinners to the Father by representing the love of God to us and by representing our fallen humanity to the Father. The ascension tells us that Christ does not stop being the mediator between the holy Father and sinful humanity.
- The ascension also marks the start of the Church's mission on earth. The Church is to fulfill her vocation between the ascension, when Christ departs, and the end, when he shall return to set all things to rights (as 'judge of the living and the dead'). This won't necessarily be easy or pleasant. It is no accident that, throughout the ages and still today, wherever Christians have suffered terrible persecution or stood beside oppressed / suffering people, the ascension of Christ has often been the focus of hope. Belief in Christ's ascension builds robust confidence in the midst of suffering!
- What remains is that we believe that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord of the earth and so live in the 'space' on earth that is given to us by the ascended Lord as a sign of hope for our suffering and sinful world. We are called to preach the word of grace and power, to resist hatred, falsehood and assaults on human dignity, to exercise patience and sometimes to suffer loneliness or persecution. We are not immune from despair or resignation. As you and I well know, the experience of God's 'absence' in our own lives and the life of the community and the Church can be almost unbearable for men and women of faith – particularly for our abused or persecuted brothers and sisters in so many parts of the earth and even for ourselves at this time of deepening hostility to Christianity in Western countries like ours.
- In the midst of evil, affliction and death we are called to participate in the worldwide ecumenical community on earth – to celebrate and embody in our life-together the fact that the reign of evil and death has come to its end in Jesus, the One who 'reigns in heaven' ('where God is') as the constant sign of the future which awaits the earth. Thus, as the end of Luke's Gospel makes clear, we are called to exercise this incredible vocation, not in a stoic or downcast manner, but 'with great joy' (v52). We are free to be the Church because the One who embodied the goodness and mercy of God and bore our broken humanity in his crucified and risen body on earth has 'ascended' as Lord of all.

The consummation of his reign in heaven still lies in a future prepared by God for the whole creation which, as we know only too well, is 'groaning for liberation'. Meanwhile, we go with Christ's blessing (vv50,51) to resist pressures to conform to 'narrow reason' or 'vague spirituality' which are both blind to the unique splendour of the Gospel in which alone there is hope for humanity. For the God who loves us and judges us in Christ is – despite appearances on earth – Lord of all. Thus may we gladly believe in the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father!

'To God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.' (Rev 5:13 RSV)

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended the heavenly throne, that he might rule over all things as Lord, keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of his peace, and bring the whole creation to worship at his feet; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.