

Today is Ascension Sunday. After weeks of celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke and its sequel the Book of Acts depict in striking form the *rising* of the Risen Lord into heaven. In her Ascension hymn, the Victorian Anglo-Irish hymn-writer Cecil Frances Alexander wrote:

The golden gates are lifted up,
The doors are opened wide;
The King of Glory is gone in
Unto His Father's side.

Thou art gone up before us, Lord,
To make for us a place,
That we may be where now Thou art,
And look upon God's face.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death by the religious authorities of his day. In the midst of his suffering, he experienced a dramatic, captivating vision of the Risen and Ascended Lord seated at the right hand of God the Father. Grabbed, held and forcibly taken out of the city, he 'saw' Jesus. In his final, desperate agonising moments, with an inner vision, a vision of the heart before him, Stephen cried out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit and lay not this sin against my killers'.

Beyond the pages of poetic Scripture, many of the Early Church Fathers wrote of the central importance of the Ascension: Justin

Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, John Chrysostom and Augustine. In the creeds of the Church, we affirm that Jesus ‘ascended into the heavens’ and ‘sits on the right hand of the Father’. In the Apostles’ Creed, the creed preferred by Calvin and Knox, we affirm that ‘He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father almighty’. The Early Church Father, Origen, believed that the Ascension was an ascension of the mind, not the body but, on the whole, most Church Fathers wrote of *totus Christus*, the lifting up of the whole Christ.

What are we to make of the ascension story, the lifting up, the withdrawing of Jesus from His disciples and being carried up into heaven? In the Book of Acts, we read that ‘a cloud took him from their sight. They were gazing intently into the sky as he went...’. In the *Tanakh*, our Old Testament, both Enoch (pictured) and Elijah ascended into heaven. In the wider Jewish tradition, Moses also ascended into heaven. In Islam, the Prophet ascends to heaven. In the biblical period and the centuries that followed, people believed in a three-tier universe: heaven above, earth in the middle, and hell (or *Sheol*) below. Given that we no longer accept that cosmology, it makes no sense to speak of Jesus going ‘up’ into heaven.



In the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist records that Jesus ‘opened their minds to understand the Scriptures’. In his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘I pray that your inward eyes are enlightened’. It is vitally important that we interpret Scripture imaginatively, with the inner eye, delving beneath the surface to discover the Spirit, the Divine Dark, within it. The former Bishop of London, the Rt Revd and Rt Honorable Richard Chartres, warns against misinterpreting Scripture ‘in the light of a flatland literalism’ and welcomes ‘the potential of symbolism’.

In the first century, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar was Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement. At the temple in Jerusalem, the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) on behalf of the entire nation entered the holiest room, the Holy of Holies, in the very centre of the temple. As part of



the ritual offering and sacrifice, the room was filled with clouds of incense. Underlying the imagery of Jesus’ ascension, did the Early Church community understand Him to be the new High Priest? In the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is explicitly referred to as the High Priest, the Anointed One, who entered ‘the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands....he entered in once and for all into the holy place...’. There is a legend that Adam and Eve, when expelled from

the Garden of Eden, smuggled out seeds which they planted in the world. These seeds grew into incense-bearing trees. Incense, then, is a 'perfume of Paradise' rather than smoke 'made of this world'. In the Syrian Orthodox Church (pictured), the Ascension of Jesus is celebrated through clouds of incense. Symbolism is important if we are to see, to understand spiritually, the treasures which Scripture has to offer.

In the closing verses of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus led His disciples out as far as Bethany. In Arabic, Bethany is known as Al-Eizariya, the place of Lazarus. Just over a mile from Jerusalem, the town is on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, which today is a site of pilgrimage to the tomb of Lazarus. It was to the Mount of Olives that King David wept for his son, Absalom. In tears, he climbed the mountain. In a vision of the prophet Ezekiel, the 'glory of God', the Presence of God, stood on the mountain. In the Jewish tradition, the resurrection of the dead will begin from the Mount of Olives. It is on this mount that YHWH, the LORD, will again appear.

In the mind's eye, with an open heart, take yourself to that holy place where King David stood, that sacred site where the glory of God stood, that hill of promise on which YHWH will appear, that place where the brother of Mary and Martha, Lazarus their silent brother, was raised from the dead, and that place where Jesus, like the High Priest in the temple on Yom Kippur, entered the cloud, the Holy of

Holies. Be still, soak yourself in the scene; let it fill your soul, so that you too may feel the Presence of the Divine, see for yourself Jesus enveloped in the perfume of Paradise, and know that you too are loved and embraced.

The poetry of Scriptural story is itself a means of grace; read meditatively, the written Word is a ground of revelation; it is a space for encounter with the Sacred. We can carry it and let it shape our living, thinking, feeling and loving. By osmosis we are united with



the Holy. One of the outstanding figures in church history of the last century was the German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis on 9 April 1945. The SS doctor who attended Bonhoeffer later wrote of the pastor's death:

On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock.... the prisoners were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this loveable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued in a few seconds. In almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man so entirely submissive to the will of God.

In his final letter to Bishop George Bell in England Bonhoeffer wrote, 'This is the end, for me the beginning of life'. I like to think that Bonhoeffer's dignity in death was shaped by his sense of the mysterious Presence, by the near unconscious assimilation of the spirituality of Scripture into his soul and by his love of Jesus. Perhaps like the first martyr Stephen, Bonhoeffer too experienced his own inner vision, sacred peace, in the tragedy of his death. Stand again in Bethany, Al-Eizariya, the place of Lazarus, and let the Spirit of Jesus lift you.

Amen.