

Sermon

Sunday 16 May 2021
Ascension

Lesson

St Luke 24: 44 – 53

In medieval stained glass there are quaint pictures of the ascension of Jesus: we see His feet projecting from the underside of a cloud as He lifts off on His space journey to the heavenly realm. In the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Book of Acts, Jesus parted from the disciples, was lifted up before their eyes, and enveloped in a cloud. From the earliest of days, the Church has expressed its faith in credal statements. In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm that Jesus rose on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. What does the Ascension mean for you? It may be understood literally or perhaps spiritually as an inward experience.

Though we are most familiar with the ascension of Jesus, in the ancient world the concept of being lifted 'up' into 'heaven' was a common one. Fifteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus, in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, we read of the dead being taken up into the presence of the god Osiris. Four hundred years before the birth of

Jesus, the Greek philosopher Socrates taught the cultivated Athenian youth of the immortality of the soul. He said, ‘Have you not discovered that our souls are immortal and never perish?’ Is that a claim of the ‘rising and ascending’ of all people?

In the Jewish tradition, in their Scriptures and other texts, there are stories of the ascension of Enoch, Moses, Elijah and Ezra. In the Roman world, the emperor, Caesar Augustus, ascended into the company of the gods, the Roman pantheon, in full sight of the senators. Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, was taken up in a cloud, into heaven. In Islam, through mystical flight, the Prophet Muhammed ascended through the heavens to the divine paradise. In the Gospels, Jesus told His listeners that the three patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were alive in God; they had already ascended to the Father. What might the ascension of Jesus mean for us?

The distinguished scientist, the late Stephen Hawking, said that heaven was a fairy story for people who are afraid of the dark. The

Oxford mathematician, John Lennox, replied, ‘Atheism is a fairy story for people who are afraid of the Light!’ If we step beyond the ‘flatland literalism’ of Scripture and welcome the imaginative power of symbolism, what might we see? The spiritual writer, Sara Maitland, who lives in the Galloway Hills, says that ‘Myth is the poetry of the soul’, while the German author, Thomas Mann, said, ‘Myth is the way things never were, but always are’.

I believe that truth may be found along different paths. We may speak of scientific truth or the truth found in philosophy or mathematics. In religion, including Christianity, there are three kinds of truth: historical, doctrinal and mythological. The rich evocative story of the ascension is surely mythological. If we immerse ourselves into the drama of the myth, see with the eye of the heart Jesus ascending into the cloud, into the Presence of the Divine, we too may experience a sense of being lifted, drawn into union with the mystery of God. Ascension is not to be thought of as a one-time event after death, an event for Jesus alone, but rather an experience that can be felt in many ways by us in this life. Have we ever felt a

sense of being lifted out of ourselves, beyond the limitations of time and space? Are not such experiences hints of ascension, of transcendent intimacy with the Eternal?

The eighteenth century evangelical preacher, Jonathan Edwards, described an intense religious experience, a moment focussed utterly on Christ. Edwards said:

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent . . . which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone: to love him with a holy and pure love . . . to serve him and follow him; to be perfectly sanctified and made pure.

It seems that Edwards was lifted out of himself. In our time and culture, ‘forests, oceans, mountains, rivers, deserts and the wilderness are appreciated as natural cathedrals, sacred places and sanctuaries for humans to commune with the Holy’. In the world of extreme sport, in what is commonly called ‘the Holy Grail of surfing’, surfers speak of the other-worldly exhilaration of being ‘barrelled’ inside a cylindrical shaped wave. One ‘soul surfer’ describes riding the

waves as a moment in which he, his board and the cylindrical wave are one: there is an all-pervading sense of oneness, an integration of body, soul and the violent forces of nature. Is not this a true awareness of being lifted out of oneself, of being more than mere matter? For a fleeting moment, the surfer is surrounded by the wave in a way that Christ was surrounded by the cloud.

If not surfing, what of the heights and remoteness of the mountains? Speaking of climbing Mount Everest, one climber said that he ‘always felt a very close spiritual association with the mountains.’ He said:

I love to be free, completely free. I firmly believe that God exists . . . As I climb, I begin losing contact, in a physical sense, with the world below . . . I feel an extremely intimate oneness with the universe.

For many, the breath-taking beauty of nature points to the Infinite. In 1859, one tyro mountaineer was lured to the Alps by rumours of its beauty and solitude. His curiosity was long-excited by the region’s grandeur, wild and unfrequented. Like so many before and since, he said that climbing upwards was a search for ‘an entirely new way of being . . . in the mountains, you are a different you’.

If we expand our appreciation of what ascension means, then it becomes an experience of being lifted out of oneself, out of this world, a true taste of transcendence and, for Christians, it is additionally an experience of the intense and overwhelming personal love of God for each one of us: we are held now and always.

Amen.