

Sunday after Ascension, 2024

If I was a certain kind of priest, other than the lovable vicar I am, I might be very cross with you all this morning. My guess is that most of you this week committed what used to be considered a fairly serious sin. I feel I should now pause and look each of you in the eye with that kind of knowing look which means your secret shame has finally been rumbled ... it would be interesting to see what you think I might have discovered! Rowan Williams once said that if most of us were to be stopped in the street by someone who said with enough conviction, 'they know!', we'd run for our lives.

So what have you done, sinners? Many things, I am sure – but worst of all, you failed to come to Church on Ascension Day. Now, I am not really being condemnatory: the vast, vast majority of English Christians don't come on Ascension Day. Generally speaking, with the possible exception of Ash Wednesday and Christmas when it falls in the middle of the week, if it isn't a Sunday, the English don't go to Church – despite centuries of Church insistence that on days like last Thursday, they jolly well should. It was only a very few years ago that the Roman Catholic Church finally gave up the struggle, and decided to keep Ascension today instead, on the Sunday nearest the traditional date.

Well, there's room for a full sermon there in itself, about how being Christian is partly about letting the rhythms of ordinary life be disrupted by the extraordinary, about the need to organise our lives around the realisation and celebration of God's saving acts, rather than merely tucking them into the part of the week where nothing more important is going on. However, I want to preach a different sermon this morning though: one more closely tied to the readings, and to the Ascension in particular.

Because perhaps one reason why we don't keep the feast properly is not just that it happens on a Thursday (incidentally, the reason for that is that it comes forty days after Easter Sunday, so marking the forty days in which the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples). Isn't it also that most of us aren't really quite sure what to make of it? Think of the pictures of the Ascension you might have seen. We see Jesus' feet sticking out of a cloud, as he rises rapidly upwards, as Mary and the disciples stand there gawping in amazement. Did that, or something like that, really happen? S. Luke certainly says so. But there are some problems. When the feet finally disappeared, where did they go next? Did Jesus keep going up, beyond the birds and the clouds, in the stratosphere and beyond? Is Heaven literally 'up there', and if we looked hard and far enough might we find him? It is easy to mock such questions as crudely physical and literal – but then, isn't S. Luke?

And there's another problem too. What does Ascension actually mean *for us*? Christmas means that God loves us enough to share our life; Easter means that death and hell are overcome. What does Ascension mean? It seems to be an event just for Jesus, one that doesn't involve me: getting him off stage at the end of the Gospel drama. Exit Jesus, to the sky, the script notes might say. Why is the marking of it a permanent part of the Christian year? What is the mystery of salvation in which keeping this feast is meant to immerse me, like keeping Christmas and Easter immerse me? Why is it *important*?

Well, perhaps this. What we celebrate on the feast of the Ascension is that Jesus' life has been set free from the limitations of time and space. A human being, as we experience being human, is limited – I am here, not there; I am now, not then. Ascension says those limitations no longer apply to Jesus. He is, as it were, lifted up out of that kind of limited existence. To the question, 'where is Jesus?' minds shaped by the Ascension have to say, 'nowhere' – he is gone. There's no one particular place you can find him now. No one location on a map, no matter how big that map was, not even if it was of the entire universe.

This in itself is not obviously good news. Jesus being absent does not sound like the stuff of Christian joy. And this is where today's readings come in. The Old Testament reading, prophesying God's act to renew Israel, promises this: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh'. In the Gospel, Jesus prays for us – quite explicitly for you and me, 'not only for these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word' – that we may be one, and that we may receive the glory which he had received from the Father.

What does he mean by 'glory'? The very life of God. The beauty, the brilliance, the power, the love. Everything that makes God, God, and made Jesus, Jesus. That's what Jesus prays we will have inside us. Think of the readings from the last couple of weeks, where he said 'I am the vine, and you are the branches' – we're in the same territory here. Jesus, the one filled with the glory of God, the one who is the glory of God made flesh, is alive and shares his life with us. He makes Himself the deepest heart of us. As I said last week, that's what baptism, communion, prayer, church are all about – our life coming together with his life, his life rising in our life.

So we have two very different truths. On the one hand, Jesus is gone. He is nowhere on a map. On the other hand, Jesus's life runs through every baptised Christian. His life is no longer limited within one human frame, one time, one space. Rather different lives, our lives, are suddenly shot through with Him. To the question, 'where is Jesus?' minds shaped by the Ascension have to say 'nowhere' – and they also have to say, 'here', in lives touched by glory, in hearts made flesh, in communion. In one sense the body of Jesus is gone; in another it is here, in you and me. Some ancient manuscripts of Paul's letter to the Ephesians – an Ascension book if ever there was one - put it best: 'we are members of his body, of his very flesh and bones'.

So why celebrate Ascension? Because it is not just a matter of wrapping up the story, getting Jesus offstage. Without Ascension, Christmas and Easter don't really happen – they remain events outside of us, remarkable stories about a first century Jew, but not about me. Ascension makes it all about us: it says that the life of that first century Jew is not only his, but bursts his bounds, and flows in me. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it best of all: 'Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men's faces.'

May he play in us. Amen.