

## Sermon

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2008  
Ascension Sunday

Lessons

### Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, because we are not able to offer You our best unless You live in us and we live in You, mercifully grant that the Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**He led them out as far as Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy....**

*St Luke 24: 50-52*

Ascendit ad coelos, sedet ad dexteram dei patris omnipotentis: He ascended into Heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. The Ascension of Jesus Christ is a central doctrine of the Christian Church. The lifting up of Jesus into heaven is explicitly recorded in the Gospel of Luke and in its sequel, the Book of Acts. In the Gospel we read, 'He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.' In the Book of Acts, we read, 'They looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up...' There are many paintings and carvings which depict the feet of Jesus on a cloud as he is lifted up to heaven while the disciples look up from below. Though there are only two explicit accounts of the Ascension, we can find other references to it in the Gospels of Matthew and John, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians, and also in First Timothy, the Letter to the Hebrews, First Peter and in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, the Book of Revelation. Beyond Holy Scripture, many of the early Church Fathers write of the importance of the Ascension: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, John

Chrysostom and Augustine. In the fourth century, at the time of the great Church Councils, when the Church wrestled with what it believed about Jesus, tried to define orthodoxy over heresy, the Ascension of the Saviour to heaven was never in doubt. The Creed of Nicea in 325AD states, He 'ascended into the heavens' and the Nicene Creed from the Council of Constantinople in 381AD states, He 'ascends into the heavens. He sits on the right hand of the Father...' And finally, The Apostles' Creed, the one preferred by the Reformers including Calvin and Knox says, 'He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father almighty.' This doctrine runs to the very centre of what the Church believes about Jesus: lose the Ascension and we lose Christianity! What does this story mean?

I recently came across a book of sermons by the Revd James Bell, DD, Minister of Coldstream, which he preached before the University of Glasgow in the late eighteenth century. Here he is preaching on the nature of God, creation and God's love. For me, he captures something of the magnitude, majesty and grandeur of God:

We are not, however, to imagine, that when God had finished the glorious work of creation, and put the whole system, material and immaterial, into motion, that he ceased to exert his omnipotent powers, and left the management of things to secondary causes, and to delegated authority. No, we are not to form such unworthy conceptions of the Divine Being. The works of Providence require the exertion of all the attributes in the contrivance and execution of the work of creation.

The same power which at first created all things, hath continued ever since to support, enliven, and invigorate them. By it the sun still shines, the moon sheds her influences, and the stars move undisturbed in their spheres. By it the purposes of Divine Wisdom are promoted throughout the infinity of nature's operations. The instincts by which the vast and innumerable tribes of irrational creatures are guided in the support and continuation of their kinds, are all manifestations of that almighty hand which hath ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight. In him we, his intelligent offspring, live, and move, and have our being. Through his never-ceasing agency, cherubim and seraphim, angels and archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, and potentates, enjoy their existence and celestial honours. There is no power but by him; no spring of material, animal, or spiritual activity, but through him; no life, but what he constantly preserves. He is all in all, through all, and over all. He is underived, immutable, and eternal; might, strength, energy, dominion, and sovereignty, for ever and ever.<sup>1</sup>

Bell writes movingly of the magnitude, majesty and grandeur of God. It is a poetic appreciation of the Divine Being with which I can identify. It is at the right hand of this Being that the Church proclaims there is a seat for Jesus of Nazareth. What are we to make of the doctrine of the Ascension?

The early Church Father, Origen, believed that the Ascension was an ascension of the mind rather than the body. He cautioned against a literal interpretation of this passage of Scripture. By contrast, Augustine wrote of

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, J *Bell's Sermons* p308f

*totus Christus*, the lifting up of the whole Christ. Calvin followed the line of Augustine and it is not until the nineteenth century that theologians express reservations about the story or, in some cases, outright rejection of it. The reservations and rejections were to do with the outmoded cosmology: heaven is not up there! If heaven is not up there, then Christ did not 'ascend.' He could not have. By the twentieth century, not even Karl Barth was prepared to visualise the ascension as a literal event. He said that he could not conceive of Christ going up as if in a balloon. We might ask the question, 'What does this story mean for us today?' But, given what we know about cosmology and biblical interpretation, I would prefer to ask, 'What did this story mean for the disciples and early Christian community?' It seems to me obvious that if Christ did not ascend up to heaven because heaven is not up there, then the disciples and the early Christians will have known that he did not literally ascend. If they knew that, what are they telling us about Jesus in this story? If, metaphorically, they give him a seat at the right hand of the One who is all in all, through all, and over all, underived, immutable, and eternal, what does that say about Jesus?

Calvin interprets the Ascension story literally but I was struck by something he said. In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Calvin writes:

If He had vanished secretly the disciples might indeed have stood rigid in astonishment, but now, standing as they are on an elevated spot with an unhindered view on all sides, they see the One whom they know so well,

and to whom they have even now been listening, being raised on high, and,  
while their eyes follow Him, being carried away in a cloud, there is no room  
for them to doubt of His Ascension to heaven.

Calvin said, 'They see the One whom they know so well...being raised on high...' There is a doctrinal point worth making as we reflect on the Ascension. The Ascension scripturally places Jesus at the right hand of God as mediator for humanity. There is no mention of any other mediator or mediatrix. The Ascension places Jesus as mediator alone, not with the saints or Mary, his mother. But it is Calvin's passing comment that I want to reflect upon: 'They see the One whom they know so well...being raised on high...'

In Luke's Gospel, the disciples, having seen Jesus lifted up to heaven, return to Jerusalem with great joy. The event, if there was one, which lies behind the story of the Ascension we will never know but the disciples passionately believed that this Jesus whom they had known had been raised to life and was now with God the Father. While he was with them, his spiritual and ethical teaching and more than that, his very being, brought them to the point that they knew Him to be a prophet of God. After his death, the disciples and the early Christian community came to understand Jesus as the Divine *logos*, the Word of God made flesh. With the eyes of their hearts open, through meditation on Scripture, reflection and prayer, the disciples believed that Jesus, like Enoch and Elijah before Him, must have ascended to God. For the early Church, there is precedence for the ascension of a prophet or one, like Enoch, who walked with God.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, based on his personal experience of Christ and Christ's followers, particularly Stephen, Paul understood Jesus as set at the right hand of God, 'set above all principality and power and might, and dominion, and every name that is named.' At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow! The early Church came to believe that, not only was Jesus greater than Enoch and Elijah and set at the right hand of God the Father, but that He was the One whom they knew so well. He was their friend. He is their friend. With great joy, they returned to Jerusalem. Does this not colour our perception of God? Yes, we can eloquently talk and sing of the magnitude, majesty and grandeur of God, but in Jesus, the Word made flesh, He is also our friend. At God's right hand, we have a good friend, One we know so well.

Shakespeare wrote:

I live with bread like you  
Taste grief  
Need friends.

Canon Charles Smyth, Dean of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, wrote a book during the Second World War entitled, *The Friendship of Christ*. In it, he said that human friendship is difficult to analyse. Smyth wrote:

One does not choose to wear one's heart upon one's sleeve: and, for any man whose friends mean as much to him as mine have meant to me, the analysis of friendship on the basis of his own experience is a sort of morbid

anatomy. A man may bring himself to write a memoir of someone he has loved – his mother, his wife, his friend – and the quality of his love will be implicit on every page: but it is a very different matter to ask him to write in cold blood, not about the person he has loved, but about his affection for that person.

In the Bible, we can point to any number of ‘purple passages’ like the lament of David over Jonathan; ‘the record of that friendship of David and Jonathan is clearly one of the greatest stories of friendship in all literature.’<sup>2</sup> In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of Lazarus as ‘our friend.’ Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus. Peter called himself the friend of Jesus and there was the beloved disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved. In speaking of his relationship to the disciples, Jesus said, ‘I have called you friends.’ He said, ‘You are my friends.’ And, he said, ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.’ To Judas in the garden, Jesus said, ‘Friend, why are you here?’ Eric James, Anglican priest, Chaplain to the Queen and, for many years, a contributor to Radio Four’s *Thought for the Day*, now 83, says of growing older:

No one warns you that you will be surrounded by friends who, like you, are suddenly incapacitated. You discover, alas, a new form of busyness: visiting so many of our friends and contemporaries in their sickness, and attending their funerals and memorial services, which you would not miss.<sup>3</sup>

In Jesus, we have a friend. That is what the disciples and early Church believed: that in God, at the very centre of the Divine Being, they had a

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<sup>2</sup> James, E *The House of my Friends* p4

<sup>3</sup> James, E *The House of my Friends* p204

friend. God in all His magnitude, majesty and grandeur spoke in Jesus, saying, 'You are my friend.'

Amen.