

Ascension Day Sermon 2017

Let us pray.

May we be alive to Your Spirit, around us and deep within. Open our hearts and minds to Your guiding that we may discern Your will and follow Your way.
Amen.

While Jesus, the Risen Christ, blessed His disciples, He withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. In the Book of Acts, we learn that as they were watching Him, a *cloud* took Him out of their sight.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul tells us that, raised from the dead, Christ is seated at the Father's right hand. In Christian art, there are many beautiful and captivating images of Christ being drawn upwards into heaven while the disciples watch in amazement.

In the South Transept of Mayfield Salisbury, we have a window telling the story of Christ's ascension. Nine of the disciples are shown with Jesus surrounded by light and the *clouds* of heaven.

In St Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai in southern Egypt there is a 6th century icon showing the climactic moment when Jesus bids His followers farewell. Mary, His mother, stands in the centre of the scene flanked by the disciples. Suspended high above them, Jesus appears in an oval-shaped mandala. The entire backdrop is filled

with light, while the mandala is filled with darkness. Jesus appears stationary, as if held momentarily between heaven and earth. For 1400 years, the monks of Sinai have been gazing into this icon, into eternity, through this tiny doorway.

What are we to make of the story, the myth of the Ascension? In Scripture itself, there is no consistency in the different accounts. In the Gospel of St Luke, Jesus ascends to heaven on Easter evening while, in the Book of Acts, the same author has Him ascend 40 days later. In the Gospel of St John, it seems that Jesus ascends immediately after speaking to Mary Magdalene and before the encounter with Thomas. What are we to make of the story of the Ascension of Jesus?

There was a tradition in Elizabethan England of 'Beating the Bounds' or boundaries. Each year on Ascension Day the local priest and church warden together with local children would walk the boundary of the village and parish and beat the ground at certain points, thus marking the boundary. In Oxford, this tradition is still observed and – to the surprise of shoppers - includes one such boundary in the centre of Marks & Spencers!

If ascension means being taken up into heaven, if it means life beyond death, then Jesus is not the only figure in the Bible about whom this is said. In the Book of Genesis, Enoch dies and is taken by God. In the Jewish *Book of Enoch*, Enoch is taken up into heaven, made the chief of the angels and attends at God's throne. In the Second Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah with a chariot of fire ascends in a whirlwind into heaven. In a dispute with the Sadducees, Jesus tells this priestly sect that God is the God of the living, not the dead: in other words, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are said by Jesus as being *alive* in God. In Islam, Muhammad has a vision while on pilgrimage to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in which he ascends a ladder to heaven. In the Book of Daniel, one like a human being comes with the clouds of heaven and is *presented* to the Ancient One, the Ancient of Days, who is seated on His throne. This graphic imagery is spectacularly evocative, but what are we to make of it – sensible, rational, scientific creatures that we are?

These images are not to be taken literally. If we read them literally, they become superstition. The very fact that the same author of Luke & Acts can describe the ascension of Jesus in two different ways is indicative that these stories are not to be read as literal-factual

history. They are mythology or spiritual writing, a faith narrative. 'Myth', says Sara Maitland, 'is the poetry of the soul.' Or, in the words of Thomas Mann, 'Myth is the way things never were, but always are.' The ancients understood that God is mystery, elusive and beyond our comprehension or expression. The mystics often articulate their thoughts of God in paradox or contradiction to show that God cannot be captured by human concepts or language. The sages preferred to describe God as 'Nothing' with a capital 'N' rather than let God be thought of as a being.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the Church today does not come from science but from the Bible. Our failure to engage creatively, spiritually, poetically, imaginatively with Scripture leaves us trying to defend the indefensible. In the Book of Acts, Jesus is withdrawn from the sight of His disciples by a cloud. Like the darkness surrounding Jesus in the 6th century mandala, the cloud is a mask, a literary device to hide the Divine. It is in the thick darkness, what the seventeenth century English mystic, Henry Vaughan, called the dazzling darkness, that God dwells.

What does the myth of the ascension mean? If, like the monks of Sinai, we pause and gaze into the story of the Ascension, then in the mind's eye, what do you see? Perhaps the first thing that is striking is that Jesus is leaving, or so it seems. Our first moment in meditation may be an uncomfortable one, one of despair: Jesus is in heaven and this world, this earth, is left an empty, Godless place. Sometimes, that is how life is experienced. This week our hearts have been bruised by the barbaric bombing in Manchester.

If we sit with the word-icon of the ascension, we may begin to see that, in Christ, humanity is being embraced by God, drawn into the very centre and soul of the Sacred. In the Book of Genesis, it looks as though God is pulling Enoch upwards into Himself. We have that same sensation with Jesus. On seeing Christ ascending, the disciples are overjoyed. This is the joy that comes from knowing that we, together with all humanity, in all our brokenness, are in this life being drawn daily by the tiniest of steps forward into the Soul of God. Heaven is not some far distant cosmic place with God's throne. It is the Transcendent, the Holy, here now, in this place, around us and within each of us. *Our* journey is an ascension or, in the Orthodox tradition, a deification. Ascension is not a story merely for the giants

of biblical history; it is your story and mine. I find it unhelpful to think of God in any sense, up there, out there. For me, God dwells within us, in the darkness of the soul, and in this life we are being drawn ever more deeply in the Divine, drawn upwards, if you like, into the eloquent silence of Eternity, into union with the Sacred.

In all our brokenness, we are drawn into God. In 2014, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho, led thousands of people across all continents in a forgiveness challenge. The 30 day challenge encourages people to explore the nature of forgiveness – what it is and what it is not - and to face some or all of the hurts in their lives. On Day 6, Mpho lead a time of reflection. Through the meditation, she took the listener into a safe place and gently, carefully, helped the one meditating to face a hurt or scar in their life, a pain much in need of forgiveness and release. Mpho asked that any resentment be set aside and asked what would be the best outcome if the listener were able to forgive? She said, ‘Smooth out the ache and let it drift up into the sunlight and disappear.’ Forgiveness is a gift of release to ourselves.

The reflection gives a real sense of letting go of our hurt into God, a sense that God walks with us through the meditation and helps us open the door to forgiveness. In the myth of Ascension, our humanity, in all its brokenness, its hurt and ability to hurt, is welcomed into God, embraced by God, and we are healed, made whole. Thomas Mann said, 'Myth is the way things never were, but always are.' We need this gospel. We are taken into the heart of love where alone our brokenness, failures and shame, are healed. God hears and experiences what it is to be human. The Ascension is a story of wholeness, healing and union with God, union for all of us.

Amen.