

5th June 2011 Easter 7

John Dunnill

Acts 1: 6 – 14; 1 Peter 5; John 17: 1 - 11

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

On a Thursday morning in May or early June, of 1966, when I was 16, I cycled with a friend out of Hereford in the West of England, where I was at school, out west towards the Welsh border to the area known since Roman times as the "Golden Valley", in the shadow of the Black Mountains, on the edge of Wales.

It was a lovely day (in my memory) and it's glorious country, Thomas Traherne country – if I can name that poet and spiritual writer who loved the word "glory". He's a writer enjoyed by several of us here, I notice, and his words keep popping up in the service sheets. Thomas Traherne lived in this country west of Hereford: and in fact he and I went to the same school – though not at the same time. I missed him by about 300 years. (I was a late developer)

So what were we doing, my friend and I, cycling around the country on a Thursday morning in term time? Well, it was Ascension Day, and since I was at a church school, Ascension Day was always a holiday and we were given a packet lunch and encouraged to get out and be adventurous. I can think of several memorable Ascension Day holidays.

As a result I've been programmed to think that Ascension Day, and the event it celebrates, is all about freedom and new possibilities, and the goodness of life. But nowadays the church hardly bothers with Ascension Day; rather than observe the event 40 days after Easter on a Thursday, it's shunted on to the following Sunday; the Catholics used to make it a day of obligation but they've dropped that, and few Anglican parishes will have even noticed it.

It was a nice surprise when we were in Bali last year to find it was a major Christian festival. Perhaps because the Muslims make a big deal about the Ascension of the Prophet Mohammed, the Indonesian Christians respond in kind by celebrating the Ascension of our Lord with enthusiasm. (But I noticed the ex-pat Christians didn't rise to the occasion with any great glee)

Why this embarrassment? Is it because it falls on a Thursday and work is so important we really can't spend an hour (let alone a whole day) recognising a central truth of our tradition?

I know there is embarrassment, because preachers usually make joking references to Luke's story of the event and to pictures of the apostles watching Jesus' feet disappearing into a cloud (There you are – I've done it, too)

You hear people say "Did the Biblical writers think that for Jesus to go back to God, he had to go up in the air like a rocket?" – with patronising remarks about how simple-minded, how literal they were. Ho-ho. Now I think we've got this completely wrong. If ancient Jews thought of God living in the sky it's because the sky is an open and unbounded space, full of infinite possibilities – where else would you picture God living? – But they also knew the sky is a physical space, and God isn't in it in the way birds and clouds are in it. God for them was an unseen, personal force, infinitely distant – and also unimaginably close: hearing the thoughts on our hearts before we say them.

So Luke tells a symbolic story of Jesus' return to God, drawing on the Old Testament story of Elijah in 2 Kings 2, going "up" to God in a fiery chariot. But he doesn't expect his readers to be so simple-minded they take its details literally. Reading the Bible literally is our problem, not theirs – it's we in our society who are obsessed with two-dimensional facts, and have shrunken, shrivelled imaginations incapable of opening out into the wonder, the infinite possibility of God. Really it seems we can't be trusted to read a story like this – an intelligently simple symbolic story – with respect and imagination. We're too keen to put it down and prove how superior we are.

But this event of the Ascension, Exaltation, Glorification of our Lord, (call it what you like) is not just in this one story – it's all over the New Testament – so let's find other ways to think about it.

For St Luke, it's a central event, almost more important than the cross. He tells the story twice – at the end of his Gospel and beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Halfway through his Gospel (chapter 9:51) Luke says "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." What will happen at Jerusalem is the crucifixion, yes, and then he will be "taken up" to God, as Elijah was taken up. In the Transfiguration Jesus is talking to Elijah and to Moses (who also was "taken up" to God, in ancient tradition) and they're talking, Luke says, about his "Departure" (his *exodus*) which he was to

accomplish at Jerusalem. It is not some afterthought – it is the main show, a departure to God, a saving event which is to be accomplished.

For the letter to the Hebrews, too, the meaning of the Cross is expressed by saying that afterwards Jesus went into heaven and went once, as the High Priest in the Temple went into the Holy of Holies, once only each year, on the Day of Atonement, to set aside sins. That liturgy points to Jesus' one entry into heaven.

In St John's Gospel, Jesus speaks about "the hour" when he will be "lifted up" – meaning two things by that physical image: being "lifted up" on the cross, exposed in a place of shame and suffering and "lifted up" to God, received into glory – or he says – "the glory I had in your presence before the world existed". Cross and glory, two completely different, opposite things, but all three writers (John, Luke, the author of Hebrews) say we have to hold these two together. The cross without the Ascension would be a tragedy, a human disaster, but no more; the ascension with the cross would be no more than a myth.

I wonder: Do we in the modern world have difficulty with giving value to the Ascension because we don't really believe the saving power of the Cross?

But for the early church these two events, two truths, go together. Hymns that they sang – and quoted lines found in the New Testament – keep coming back to these two as a pair. Just three examples – there's the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2: 8, quoted by Paul:

“Christ humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name”.

And the letter to the Hebrews does the same thing, using the symbolism of sacrifice and kingship: -

“When he had made purification for sins [on the cross] he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” [having ascended into heaven]

Finally, a fragment found in 1 Timothy 3: 16 says “the great mystery of our religion” is this:

“He was revealed in flesh
he was vindicated in spirit .. and [two lines later]
he was taken up in glory”

- so there's the cross, resurrection and ascension all together.

What does this mean, then, for our Christian lives together? How does affirming the Ascension alter the shape or intent of our faith?

Firstly, it means we need to look up to Jesus as much as we look back, or, it means we can't look back to Jesus as a figure in history, and see him truly and fully, unless we are also looking up to Jesus with God "enthroned in heaven" – to use more picture language. Whether you think of God as "up there" or "in here", Jesus is the one who unites us to God, to whatever is the deepest reality, the ground of our being. Our Christian story says that in Jesus God has become joined to humanity – not that God can ever be apart from us or how would we exist? And the Ascension says that that was not a one-off or temporary event: Christ took human being into heaven, into God; in him we remain joined to God and it's in him we see what God is like.

Secondly, there's a connection between the image of Christ, enthroned as universal Lord and the compassion of God for the sufferings of humanity in the world. It is through the eyes of Christ, crucified and ascended, that God looks with compassion now on people in the Sudan: a nation about to be divided between the mainly Muslim North and the mainly Christian South, where violence is erupting in the border areas, whole towns are being destroyed, thousands forced to flee for their lives.

It's with that same compassion that God looks, now, at Anglicans in Zimbabwe being persecuted by their Government, helped by one of their own former bishops, a friend of Mugabe – where churches are being seized and priests and people arrested.

Christ shows us the humanity and compassion of God. It's in him that we can hold these and all our other concerns before God, and through Christ we are moved to care and to act.

So the Ascension reveals a truth about Christ which is also a truth about us. It calls us to look at the world and our own lives from the point of view of Christ the universal lord – to see that "the way things are" is not "how things have to be". That war, famine and deceit are not God's will for us any more than fear, slander or contempt. He calls us to shake off our slumbers, our indifferences, our casual ways of harming or ignoring others and to look up, to see the possibilities that God is drawing us into. The Ascension which we remember as an event in the past, to do with Christ, is a permanent possibility into which we are invited to enter, through Christ.

This is a truth celebrated wonderfully by my old schoolmate, Thomas Traherne. He says this in *Centuries of Meditation, Second Century*, chapter 18:

"You shall be glorified, you shall live in communion with Him, you shall ascend into the Throne of the highest Heavens; you shall be satisfied, you shall be made greater than the Heavens, you shall be like Him, when you enjoy the world as He doth; you shall converse with His wisdom, goodness, and power above all worlds, and therefore shall know Him. To know Whom is a sublime thing; for it is Life Eternal."

Thanks be to God. Alleluia, Christ is risen