

Christ Church 28 May 2017: Sunday after Ascension

Collect for Ascension Day... ‘that like as we do believe your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend and with him continually dwell.’

Some years ago a popular clergyman, the dean of one of our cathedrals, died in the prime of life of a heart attack after mowing the deanery lawn. The cathedral and its grounds were packed for the funeral, and he was buried outside the west door of the cathedral, on a beautiful sunny afternoon, mourned by hundreds of church members from all over Ireland, from Malin head to Mizzen Head, from Dublin to Galway. After his burial we were all quiet in the sunshine. And then suddenly, his widow moved forward to greet a friend; and over the next few moments the funeral was transformed into a garden party, as formally dressed people turned or moved to greet old friends from across Ireland. It was a striking demonstration of how the Church of Ireland is a huge network of people linked by marriage, by friendship, by church allegiance, by common culture and ethos, right across the land. We are a human society, focussed on a way of life, with a regular pattern of social life. Our focus is, at one level, on our fellow church members and our activities in this world.

But every now and then there erupts into that pattern a major festival which makes demands on our understanding and reminds us of another world – Advent with its tones of judgment, Christmas with the idea of God’s presence in the world, Easter with the idea of resurrection, Whitsun or Pentecost with the idea of the Spirit inspiring us, and Trinity Sunday with its intellectual demands of how to see God as three in one and one in three. And Ascension, with its difficult if exciting picture of Jesus rising up through clouds to the courts of heaven above – a picture easy to envisage but an event hard to accept literally.

So what do we mean by the Ascension? The Prayer Book presents it as a major festival, but its timing, forty days after Easter, and so on a Thursday, not a Sunday, means that most people pass it by, and it has lost its importance for many Christians. All most people know of it is the story of Jesus, seen from below disappearing into clouds above, and most biblical scholars would see this as giving us not historical fact but a legend with theological meaning. This story appears only in Luke’s Gospel where it seems to indicate the end of the appearances of Jesus to his disciples after his resurrection and to mark a new period in which Jesus has gone from among the disciples and the church is left to get on with it. The idea of Jesus ascending to join God in heaven owes a lot to the vision in the Old Testament book of Daniel, the vision of the Son of Man being taken up with the clouds of heaven and presented to the Ancient of Days, God, and being given dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. The early first-century Christians applied this picture to Jesus, who like the Son of Man in the vision would ascend to meet God and be given power and dominion over all the earth. A similar idea

comes in the Psalms, where God speaks to the king of Jerusalem and says ‘You are my Son; I will make the ends of the earth your possession’ and again, in words quoted by Jesus, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool’. The early Christian writers were applying this Old Testament imagery to Jesus, to make the point that the resurrected Jesus was now their Lord, and indeed Lord of all, ‘above all rule and authority and power and dominion’ (Eph. 1.21).

We do not have to take the Ascension story literally, but we do have to take the meaning of its imagery very seriously. There are just two aspects of it to focus on. The first is what St Paul says in his epistle to the Colossians – a small Christian church in the middle of modern Turkey. ‘If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.’ Put to death what is earthly in you’ – Paul lists things like impurity, evil desire, covetousness, anger, malice, slander – and put on compassion, kindness, humility, and love, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

The second aspect of the Ascension is of course the recognition of Jesus as Lord; that at the name of Jesus, as Paul put it, every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul knew that in his world of Roman power and Greek culture there were many gods and many lords but that for us ‘there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are’ (I Cor. 8.6). Paul was thinking of the ancient gods – in the Greek world, Zeus, Aphrodite, Poseidon, or in the Roman world, Juppiter, Venus, Neptune, - but also of the political powers of his day,

including Roman emperors like Nero. But the point remains the same for us. We are not to be ruled by the culture of our time – the gods of materialism or pleasure or power – but by the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount and the virtues of love spelled out by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 – ‘now abide faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love’. But in particular we are not to give allegiance to other lords, other Caesars, who ask too much of us. We live in a world today increasingly run by great international lords - do I need to mention by name all those Caesars who have recently elevated themselves upon the international political stage? Belief in the Ascension means that we have to recognise that we must owe allegiance to the principles of the risen Christ rather than to the principles of any contemporary Caesar. And belief in the Ascension also means that we can rise above the powers of darkness that afflict our present world, whether in in the world-wide web or the streets of Manchester or in cities in Europe or among our Christian brethren in Egypt. One essential feature of Christianity which we should never forget is that it has the power to raise us above the limitations and the tyrannies and the hatreds of this world and its mortality.

I end by returning to that summer event outside a cathedral. It was a symbol of how a sad death and a burial can resurrect a joyful community looking to its ascended Lord for its life and fellowship. May the feast of the Ascension always have that power.

