

A Sermon for the Feast of the Ascension
Delivered at St George's Round Church, 2017, By Benjamin Lee

From our Lesson: *And when [Jesus] had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight.*

And from our Gospel: *So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.*

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.+

The Ascension, which we celebrate today, is one of the great feasts of the Church's liturgical year, and also of considerable antiquity, going back at least to the fourth century, if not earlier. The ritual provisions for this day in our Book of Common Prayer show that it is regarded as of the very highest rank of solemn days set apart to honour our Lord, equal to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. This liturgical solemnity of course reflects the great theological significance of this day: for today we commemorate the the completion of the circle of divine condescension, in which the Eternal Word, the Son of God, came down from heaven, to be incarnate as a man, and the whole drama of salvation history which then ensued: from his birth, his passion and death, his resurrection, right up to his ascension, the climax of the movement, when the only begotten Son of God returns to the Father whence he came. But, it can hardly be said that the Ascension is a popular festival in this part of the world today—though I see that all of you gathered here tonight wish to prove me wrong in that judgment! And, while we certainly acknowledge that Jesus “ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father,” in our Creeds, I wonder if, for many of us, this tenet of our belief has become obscure, or perhaps seems to us lifeless, to the point that we give it little heed.

In my own church upbringing, in the Mennonite Brethren tradition, the ascension was simply not taught, as there was no thought to it having any meaning distinct from the resurrection. My Mennonite mother-in-law, on the other hand, related to me a story from her generation, in which, as a child, she witnessed the transition of Ascension Day from a community holy day into just another reason to relieve boredom and to expand individual consumer desire. In the sixties, the Mennonites in all the rural towns and villages around Reinland, southern Manitoba, where she was from, had the day off from school or work, to celebrate *Himmel fahrt*, which is German for “traveling to heaven.” Everyone was expected to go to church, to hear the minister preach and to sing the old hymns. But instead of keeping the day holy and celebrating a feast with the community, eventually most came to use this day as an excuse to go on a shopping trip to the big city, so the religious holiday jokingly became known as “Winnipeg fahrt.” The commemoration of Christ's “traveling to heaven” to be enthroned on God's right hand was thus reduced to the villagers' fun-filled day trips, “traveling to Winnipeg,” for entertainment and amusement. My mother-in-law's story illustrates, I think, a phenomenon that is all too common in an increasingly secularized Church, but which is also really just the ongoing daily

struggle of our Christian life in pilgrimage: rather than living according to our restored nature established above by Christ and to which he calls us, we set our hearts upon earthly things, orienting ourselves according to our fleshly desires; we surround ourselves with common comforts as if they could finally and completely fulfill us. We thus become attached to the world by its false allurements.

In contrast, hear St Paul's exhortation to the Colossians: *If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things; for you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.*¹ Here, as is often the case in the theology of the Pauline epistles, only a thin line differentiates resurrection and ascension. But they are nevertheless two aspects in the one exaltation of Christ. Let us briefly consider these in their connection and distinction.²

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the feast of which we celebrated exactly forty days ago, is the triumph, once for all, of life over death, the cosmic victory in which the renewal of all creation has begun. The mystery of Easter is that Christ's death and resurrection represents a certain cosmic reversal: what the first Adam inaugurated—the reign of sin and condemnation and death—the second Adam has decisively overturned. Christ in his earthly ministry proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God, and by his death and resurrection he indeed inaugurated its eternal reign: the law of sacrificial love, the reconciliation of sinners to the Father, and the victory of life eternal. All this is beautifully summed up in the 11th century Easter Sequence, *Victimae Paschali*, which we have chanted every Sunday since the Resurrection:

Death and life have contended
In that combat stupendous:
The Prince of Life, who died
Reigns immortal.

. . . Christ indeed from death has risen,
Our new life obtaining.
Have mercy, victor King, ever reigning!

Christ's rising from the dead was not a mere resuscitation: he was not revived in a body which would again suffer decay—had that been the case, the old, corruptible order of things would remain essentially unchanged, and death would have the tragic last word. No: that is not the good news of Easter. Rather, in the appearances of Jesus' resurrected body, the disciples had a glimpse of the perfection of human nature; they were given to see—if they had the eyes to see it—what Adam was

¹ Col. 3:1-3.

² My thoughts here are indebted to Oliver O'Donovan's discussion of Articles II through IV of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, in his *On the 39 Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Oxford: The Paternoster Press, 198), 27-40.

always *meant* to be, but which he had lost through sin: the integrity and splendour of the human made in God's image, free from the bonds of death.

Crucially, however, the second Adam's perfect restoration of what the first Adam had forfeited, is only one aspect of creation's renewal. We thus come to the significance of the Ascension.

What especially distinguishes the Ascension is the elevation of Christ to the Father in heaven, to be in intimate communion with him, at the right hand of his gracious favour. But what, really, does this mean? In the first place, it is an event in history, witnessed by the "men of Galilee" who were left gazing up at the sky. It is the physical departure of Christ from his disciples. But Christ's ascent into heaven, his going up, being received by the cloud, and sitting at the right hand of the Father—all of this can be said only problematically, because "heaven" and the "right hand of the Father" are not locations in time or space as we know it. We are here at the threshold of history and what is beyond history. Language here strains to express the inexpressible: these descriptions refer to that which is somehow beyond the spatio-temporal dimension, with which alone we are familiar. There is, from our perspective, as there doubtless was for the first disciples, an irreducible strangeness to the Ascension as an event in history. The scriptural detail that Christ was borne up out of sight in *a cloud* is perhaps significant: the cloud is a cloud of our unknowing, a veil which hides the fullness of Christ's glory which is not yet ours to see or comprehend.

Because Christ, in his incarnation, took our human nature upon himself, as St Paul reminds us, in his death and resurrection, it is we, too, who have died to sin and risen to life with Christ—that is simply a *fact* of our being members of his mystical body by our baptism. Likewise, the Ascension of our Resurrected Lord unfolds the implication of this, namely that our life is *hid with Christ in God*:³ in his Ascension Christ has taken up the very humanity—his and ours—which he restored; he has elevated it and transformed it into new spiritual life in the very presence of God. This is what the Greek theologians call *theosis* or the gift of "divinization," which is the calling of all human beings to be united with God, to become partakers of the divine life. As the 7th century Byzantine monk, St Maximus the Confessor, put it, the experience of divinization is "the deepest longing of the saints, the desire of human nature for assimilation to God, and the yearning of the creature to be wholly contained within the Creator."⁴ Christ ascended has reached the fulfillment of this human destiny; heaven, the Kingdom of God, is our final home and resting place, and the end of all our desire is simply God Himself. Jesus' heavenly session is his triumphant reign, his universal kingship, already achieved. As we heard the Psalmist declare this evening: *for the Lord Most High is to be feared;/ he is a great King over all*

³ Col. 3:3.

⁴ Nicholas Conostas, "Introduction," in *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), xvii.

*the earth.*⁵ Christ in his ascension has accomplished his kingship of the earth, though it remains to be universally manifested. Insofar as this manifestation is not yet, so for us, the ascended and glorified life is in a sense still future: it belongs to the end of time when Christ shall come again in the same manner that he departed. But, in another sense, it is *already* the basis of our life, here and now, inasmuch as it is the divine Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who guides us into all truth, purifying and converting our wills.

As we consider this spiritual return of all things into God, it may seem that we are very far indeed from the dust and ashes of Ash Wednesday, when the priest, marking our foreheads with the sign of the cross, reminded us of our mortality, its cause, and the sacrifice which the man Christ himself offered: "Remember, O Man, that dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." How is it that we are dust, and yet, hidden with Christ in God, we are spirit? The human ascent to God does not involve a rejection of the world or of our bodies: rather, the only path is *through* matter and our very bodies into the realm of spirit, *through* the temporal into the eternal life of God: and so it can only be by means of disciplined practice and contemplation, of our souls and bodies, that we ourselves and the world will be transformed and glorified. We pray that we may even now, in heart and mind, ascend into heaven with Christ, and with him continually dwell; and yet our Lord sends us out into the world, to be his Body, the Church, in the power of the Spirit. Let me come back to words I first heard from another Manitoban, the Anglican singer-songwriter, Steve Bell:

"Christ has no body here but ours;
No hands, no feet here on earth but ours
Ours are the eyes through which he looks
On this world with kindness

... Through our touch, our smile, our listening ear
Embodied in us, Jesus is living here.
Let us go now, inspirited
Into this world with kindness.⁶

Amen.+

⁵ Ps 47.

⁶ From Steve Bell's 2011 album, "Kindness," this song is his version of a song written by Brian McLaren, who himself based it on a text from the 16th century Spanish mystic, Theresa of Avila.