

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Ascension Day – 21th May 2020

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We have reached the end of the Eastertide, the forty days since Easter Day in which we have absorbed the beauty of its message in word and sacrament, image and song, balancing the forty days of Lent which went before them. The trajectory of that spiritual journey culminates in the Ascension, after which the risen Christ ceases to be experienced as a tangible presence by his followers, as they wait in prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Of all the events that took place after Good Friday – so unprecedented that they took the New Testament writers to the very limits of language - the Ascension is perhaps the hardest for us to absorb. Artists have struggled to portray it, with awkward feet disappearing through the tops of ceilings or stained glass. The painting by Salvador Dali at the top of our service sheet is one of the better renditions of the Ascension, but even that is still somehow awkward.

It is not just artists who find the imagery difficult. The same is true for many Christians. There is something particularly physical about the way it is described in the passage from Acts ('he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight') which can leave people wondering whether, if they find the physical image difficult to grasp, their faith is somehow compromised. For those who feel a sense of tension because of this, how might it be resolved?

Around sixty years ago Bishop John Robinson wrote a book called *Honest to God*, which caused a furore when it was first published. In it the author admitted that

he no longer found helpful the traditional imagery of a God who was 'up there', or even 'out there' somewhere beyond the known universe. He argued that such unease was actually a good thing, as it enabled those who struggled with the traditional imagery yet still identified themselves as Christian to explore how it might be possible to continue to speak of God in a way that connected with the postmodern world. Such exploration would involve leaving behind a set of images often absorbed in childhood (at its simplest, the notion of God as an old man with a white beard), growing beyond them to a mature, adult faith.

There isn't space here to detail the ways Robinson suggested for understanding the traditional imagery in new ways. For now, we should simply note that in terms of cosmology, in the New Testament era God was understood as 'up' and the earth as 'down', and we should not be troubled by it. And we must not think that in order to be Christian we somehow have to *unknow* the physical laws that have been discerned in the intervening centuries. Our faith requires us instead to understand what the Gospel writers were seeking to convey in their own time, and then to ask ourselves what truths the writings reveal in ours.

The answer to the first question is that the Gospel writers sought to express the deepest truths in the way that was most vivid to them. And, as in every age, to do this they resorted to the language of poetry and metaphor. The writer Mark Oakley, a former chaplain in this Diocese, writes that 'poetry is the person of faith's native language'. He adds: 'from its very beginnings, the human intuition that the world is a gift, that it has a divine origin, and that life and love come from this same source, was explored and shared poetically. Our faith is nothing without metaphor. Poetry is the language that most truly reflects the life of the soul.'

If the language of the Ascension is the language of poetry, what does it tell us? First and foremost, it tells us of the unique and ultimate significance of Jesus. And it uses a specific literary technique, one that is often overlooked when talking about the Ascension – the technique of intertext, or cross-reference. The notion of Jesus being taken up to heaven in a cloud cross-refers to the stories of Moses and Elijah, the two most important Old Testament figures who between them represented the law and the prophets – the two figures of whom Jesus’s closest companions became aware at his transfiguration. Moses had entered the cloud to be with God. Elijah had been taken up to heaven in a whirlwind when his mantle passed to Elisha. On one level, the New Testament writers were seeking to convey that Jesus was every bit as important as Moses and Elijah. Moreover, the Gentile author of Luke and Acts, from which our two readings today are taken, was insistent: not only was Jesus as significant as Moses and Elijah, he was even more so, because the salvation he offered was for the whole world – the fulfilment of the ancient promise that Israel would be a blessing to all the nations.

What truths does the Ascension story reveal to us in our time? In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes that Christ is ‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion’, and that God has ‘put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body’. The Ascension reminds us that Christ’s is the authority to which we are to look in shaping our relations with one another, as individuals and communities. His example of unconditional, self-sacrificial love must inform the way we are and the way we behave. The Ascension is also the event that changes the focus of Christ’s ministry from himself to those who follow him. It is a trajectory that began at the resurrection when Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: ‘Do not hold on to me ... but go to my brothers.’ The two men in white robes (Moses and Elijah

again?) say: ‘why do you stand looking up into heaven?’ They say, by implication: turn instead and look at one another, for you will find Christ there. Look with new eyes on the hungry, the poor, the prisoner, the unwell. All your human divisions do not matter: each one of you is of infinite worth.

It was St Teresa of Avila who expressed the insight that Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no eyes, no hands, no feet but ours. We are to continue his work. It will be difficult, costly, but we will not be without help. The disciples were to stay in the city until they had been ‘clothed with power from on high’, with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Being Christ’s eyes, hands and feet is something we have seen a lot of in these weeks of the coronavirus pandemic. All over the world people have expressed surprise and gratitude at the courage and self-sacrifice of those who have placed themselves at risk to save others. Gratitude, yes. But surprise? The Christian faith teaches us that the impulse of self-giving love is wired into humanity, made in the image of God, the God who is Love. Everything about Jesus of Nazareth expressed that self-giving love. Those who witnessed him treating each damaged person he encountered with a recognition of their unique, infinite worth in the sight of God; who watched him include those whom their society excluded or despised, risking infection to touch the untouchable; who learned from him the nature and cost of forgiveness; who saw him kneeling to wash their feet, turning on its head the world’s understanding of power and authority; who lived through the desolation of his death on the cross yet after three days found him present again among them – they knew that everything must be redefined in the light of what they had seen. God’s very nature had been revealed as costly, self-giving love. And the action of that love would continue

to the end of time through the outworking of the new commandment: 'You are to love, to give attention, to value, one another as I have loved you.'

The instinct for that love is wired into us, and by no means confined to those who call themselves Christian. Yet for those who do seek to follow Christ it is the thing that makes the difference, the thing that makes sense of it all. The ultimate significance of Christ is what we celebrate at Ascensiontide. The turning to find him in others is what gives life to all in his name. Waiting on and being open to the Holy Spirit is what makes it possible.

As an example of how this works, Michael Mayne, the former head of religious broadcasting at the BBC, once told a story of how he visited Calcutta to make a radio programme about the work of Mother Teresa.¹ In the Home for Dying Destitutes run by her order of sisters, he noticed that over the tub where the destitute and the dying were washed, these words had been written: 'The body of Christ.'

Who says that isn't Ascension?

Amen.

¹ Michael Mayne, *Alleluia is our Song*, pp 56, 67.