

May 4, 2008

Most weeks, when we use one of the Ecumenical Creeds, we confess "he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father". With these words we note the transition which is traditionally celebrated in this liturgical week – whether on the Thursday just past or picked up a little later on the Sunday which follows.

The *doctrine* of the Ascension – the meaning of the Ascension – is itself not particularly problematic and is, indeed, very good news, but Luke's *account* of the Ascension as we've heard it this morning goes some way to making it rather harder than it need to be.

In our Acts reading we heard: "as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (v.9). Alone among the gospel writers, Luke gives a graphic account of Jesus' being lifted up into heaven – a kind of divine "beam me up, Scottie". There is very little to distinguish what he describes from what you might see if a person were hoisted up on a line by helicopter, feet dangling overhead, until lost in the clouds.

Luke's account of the Ascension is possibly even more difficult to get our head around than talk of the resurrection of Jesus. Whereas we might be able to grant that death to life might happen – especially as no description is given of what actually took place – it's difficult to make sense of where Jesus *goes* as he disappears into the clouds. Luke, of course, would answer, "heaven", but we've long since abandoned the thought that heaven is up. It would be easier for us simply to hear that Jesus, when he finished talking to the disciples, vanished from their sight (cf. Luke 24.31), and be *told* that the place he vanished to was heaven rather than to see him on his way there.

Our confidence that that Luke understands what he is doing in telling this story is not enhanced when he writes of two angelic figures appearing beside the disciples and gently chiding them: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" The implication seems to be that the disciples – and we – ought not stand around

looking towards heavenly things, but instead look to what is going on around us. And yet, the two shining men continue, and seem to contradict themselves: "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Presumably, then, we *ought* to be looking up, despite what the men say, as we await the return of Jesus, coming back down again from heaven. Just what Luke means here is far from clear.

The Ascension *as an event* is not a dominant feature in the New Testament. It is a little like the Christmas stories, told quickly and without later references back to them from the rest of the New Testament – like something which must have happened and so is noted with an account or two, but otherwise not particularly important. *That* Jesus was born is always important; *how* it happened does not really matter. And so Paul, John and Mark don't make any significant reference to the historical circumstances of the birth of Jesus.

So also for the Ascension: it matters greatly *that* Jesus is "elevated" to "God's right hand"; *how* that happened, or what it might have looked like, or even precisely when it occurred, few New Testament writers bother to speculate about. Luke's rather literal image of a body elevating into the heavens is no doubt intended to deal with the question of where the body of Jesus goes – clearly, into heaven, a place like earth where

bodies like ours occupy a space like the world's space.

But the more important theological point is that the doctrine of the Ascension points to the withdrawal of Jesus as a tangible, physical presence for his disciples.

Something significant has come to an end. For all that is affirmed about the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus after Easter, this presence is clearly no longer what the disciples knew before Easter, nor what was experienced in the resurrection "appearances" immediately after

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Yet, with that ending something significant has also begun. The Ascension marks of the beginning of a new time, which is in fact the time we now live in – the time when Jesus dwells with God *on our behalf*. It's worth noting that the Ecumenical creeds – including the Apostle's Creed – have a shift of tense when they get to the Ascension. As the story of God in Christ unfolds in the Creed, we hear that Jesus *was* conceived, *was* born, *suffered*, *died*, *was* buried, *descended*, *rose* and then, shifting from the past tense to the present, now *"is seated"* at the right hand of the Father...

To speak of Jesus' return to the Father is to describe our time as one marked by the presence of the crucified one with God in heaven. That is, ours is a time marked by God's embrace of God-forsakenness. In metaphorical language drawn from the royal court, one who died the death of sinners now "sits at God's right hand". Seated there, Jesus becomes, as it were, *a reminder* to God of his love for the world, the presence of the broken, godless world at the heart of the heavenly court.

Over time our liturgical marking of the Ascension has increasingly become a celebration of Jesus' elevation as "king", somewhat separated from any particular meaning this might have for us. Yet the "for us" dimension is all that really matters in our talk about God, for all we really know of God is what has been revealed about him in his actions *for us*. As far as the Ascension goes, the "for us" element is not in the *elevation* of Jesus, but in that it is *Jesus* who is elevated – Jesus, who died a sinner's death, discounted and discarded; Jesus who was one of us and suffered our fate, and yet was raised by God to become an indicator of God's power to overcome even the death suffered by the godless.

The "ascent" of Jesus to heaven, and his sitting at God's right hand, is as much a part of his work for us as was his life and death. For in this elevation what Jesus experienced becomes central to the life of God, and the life of the world: to God Jesus stands as the sign of broken creation; to the world Jesus stands as the sign of the broken and yet God-embraced creation.

Here is *hope* beyond what we might have imagined – not that we might one day elevate ourselves but that, as we are, we might still be found at the heart of God, our lives hidden with

Christ in God, loved as we are, and yet in that love transformed into our true selves.

To declare that Jesus is ascended to heaven is to declare that even we have a place at the heart of God. This is the good news of the gospel, for which we give all thanks and praise: to God be the glory! Amen.

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