

Ascension 2010

Luke 24:44-53

Today is one of those unfortunate days when I begin preaching without the faintest idea what I'm going to say. We'll just role with the punches since there is no other choice. If something positive comes out of this, credit the Holy Spirit. If it's a disaster, blame me.

To begin: a comment about the deceptions unintentionally introduced into Christianity by the changefulness of language. Many Christians want doctrine to have a consistent meaning through time. Unfortunately, the meanings of the words we use to talk about doctrine don't hold still – they change with the changefulness of all mortal things, including languages. The Latin word we're dealing with is “ascendo.” It frequently (in fact, usually) does mean to go or rise up, but can also mean “to fill up,” “to enter into” or “to finish.” The artistic presentation of the Ascension seems to focus mainly on the rising up aspect of the word, perhaps because it's harder to depict “filling up” by means of a physical image. In artistic depiction, as in other things, the path of least resistance is not always the path of accuracy. If we want to understand the role of the Ascension then we explore this idea of “filling up” as well as “rising up.” Note the Collect of the Day (Book of Common Prayer p. 226 – The notion of “filling” is the object of the action of Christ's Ascension.) When I think of the traditional imagery of Ascension I am transported to, at the most recent, the 17th century when it was still possible to think of heaven as “up.” Since then the usefulness of the imagery of “rising up” has been going down hill.

So an exploration of filling or completing may move us in a more helpful direction than one of rising.

When religions are studied academically, one asks, “What's the point to this religion? Why do people practice it? What does it say about how they understand, how they experience, human existence?” Different religions do all this differently. I frequently hear, in my classes, a platitude common in this culture: “Well, all these different religions, at the bottom they're all saying the same thing.” At best, that's inaccurate; at worst intentionally dismissive of other people's beliefs. They are not saying the same thing. They experience human existence in different ways, which we frequently miss since most of us can talk about these ways in only one language.

In the Christian way of experiencing human existence why does the story of Jesus end with the rising up of Jesus or his filling all things or whatever image is used? The key is a struggle to, somehow, talk about, to communicate, not so much the experience of God as of ordinary human existence. In ordinary human experience there is, for many of us, a sense of incompleteness, of things not being filled. While going through life we occasionally wonder “What's going on around here? Life isn't terribly clear!” And we are stuck with doubt, not so much doubt of particular truth claims about Jesus as doubt of the existence or meaning of anything important in ourselves. Truly dissolving doubt is not of God, but of the reality of our own inner life. Is there anything beneath my surface? Do I have the capacity to be touched by God?

The root of religion is corrupted if we rework this question about ourselves into the question, “Is God real or not?” I think the real question is, “Are human beings real or not?” We tend to ignore that question because it’s immediate, powerful, and, at least for me, scary. God we can argue about. He, at least, has the good manners not to interfere in the course of events in too perceptible a way. He can be cast as an object for study or discussion. So we can talk about his existence or non-existence and there is a comforting distance about that discussion. But when it comes time to look at the movement toward death in our lives; at the solid, continuous drip of time; and to take stock of our own connectedness or lack of connectedness, and of our own sense of meaning, then it all begins to be a bit challenging.

In the Ascension, let me point out an overlooked part of the story. The focus seems to be on Jesus either going up, or filling up or whatever. But in the story he is blessing the disciples while he is leaving. And the blessing is as important as the departing.

So what happens in a blessing? We’ve all sorts of paraphernalia around this worship space with all sorts of technical names: paten, chalice, aumbry, ciborium. If we were a fancy church with the resources to do complicated ceremonies there would have been services for the blessing of each of these things. But in the really good liturgical manuals, there will be an asterisk referring you to a footnote, usually in small italic type, which says, “Well, all these services of blessing are kind of fun but they’re completely unnecessary.” They are unnecessary because all things we use in worship are blessed in and by the using. Special services are nothing more than pointing at the obvious – that in using these things in the worship of God they are blessed. That’s where the specialness comes from – the use for a special purpose. A formal blessing is a pointing at the intended history of something. To bless is to historicize, to place into historical context in such a way that the potential for good in something is brought to the surface and publically claimed as the objective of that which is blessed. Blessings are statements of intention, statements of direction through history, of trajectory through the passing of time. They are not magic dripping off the ends of my fingers imbuing something with a special divine quality that puts it half in this world and half in another world.

So if Jesus is blessing his disciples as he departs, he is stating their direction. Where do you guys go from here? That’s a continuing religious question. Well, folks, where **do** we go from here? How is the direction we’re given, the blessing to be lived out? How is our relation with God to be explored, affirmed, shared? To be blessed, at least as I understand it, is simply to understand that those are the questions around which a worthwhile human existence is to be built. We’re not blessed by finding answers, neither are we blessed by being virtuous. The blessing we receive through Christianity is help in remaining focused on the issues of value and meaning. The whole apparatus of the church, doctrine, worship, community, is all aimed back, somehow, to asserting the worth, the value, the ultimacy of human life. In that regard, there is nothing worse for a homely, reasonable, useful Christianity than a little too much interest in or emphasis on heaven. (An overemphasis on hell is even more dangerous, but that’s not usually an Episcopalian problem.)

If our relations with the depth of ourselves were intact, the point to the Ascension would be that we would, in the fullness (the filling up) of ourselves, discover the humanity of Jesus. And

in discovering his humanity, the Christian claim is that we discover the divinity of God. The only place in which Jesus is available for the discovery of his humanity is in each other. If we do not find the humanity of Jesus, and therefore God, in each other, I do not think we will find God in heaven, on earth or under the earth. I certainly would not expect to find him in a book used as an authority or a church used as a social institution. (Although I can find him in the human presented by means of a book or in a church dedicated to serving and exalting the human.) Always, always, it comes back, in some way or other, to the primacy of person. For Christ to bless his disciples as he departs from them is a statement that he will be found in our blessed humanity. That is your direction as my follower, to discover God in the human, to exalt me in your neighbor, to live the incarnation as the principle of your daily spiritual life.

It's almost like a koan. (What do you do if you meet the Buddha on the road? You kill him.) In order to find the Christ, one needs to be able to set the church aside, the church which is so frequently saying: "Look over here in this program and find the Christ! Be charismatic, or be EFMish or be Marriage Encounterish, or be something or other beyond your daily and ordinary selves and you will find the Christ! No, the Christ is not, I think, in any program. Not even in scripture! Not even in Eucharist! You may find the Christ in your own open hearted reading of scripture – but that's not the book, but the book in you. You may find Christ in the devout and humble reception of the Eucharist, but that's not the Eucharist, but the Eucharist in you. The Old Testament's phrase about God's attitude towards feasts and solemn assemblies occurs to me – and he's not complimentary. The feast may be condemned, but the capacity of the loving heart to receive and express the love of God during the feast and by means of the feast is never condemned.

I think being Christian comes round, at the end, to our capacity to accept being blessed. It is in our reception of Christ's blessing that we look for the reality of God. The Ascension, which sounds on the surface as if it points to another world, does, in fact, point to another world. But it points to the mysterious world of the depth of privacy within which each one of us has to discover our relations with others and their meanings. It is within that private inwardness that we, somehow, find whatever it is that God is.

More and more I experience the capacity of Christianity to say, "Look over here at our programs and institutions, look at correctness of doctrine, look at properness of behavior, look at success and failure, look anywhere except inside yourselves at that frightening mystery which is each one of us when we're not trying to define ourselves in terms of things pasted on our outsides. But Christ blesses his disciples as he is leaving them to their own devices, as he is leaving them to their private inwardness, as he is leaving them to discover the reality of God in the mysterious core of our shared possession of the humanity of Christ.

I think that's enough about that. Now, with a sense of some irony, let's rise and say the creed together.