

## Ascension 2011

Ascension is a nearly lost day. Always falling on a Thursday, it breaks the contemporary pattern of church on Sundays. When most Americans were small farmers, when 90% of the population was self employed, it didn't make much difference whether a service happened on Thursday or Saturday or whenever. The amount of wheat to be scythed was just what it was; the horseshoes to be smithed were just what they were. Whether it was the weekend or not was irrelevant in the face of agricultural need.

But now, mid-week worship poses more challenge. Most of must be at work whether we are needed there or not. So Ascension Day has slowly receded below the horizon of Christian awareness.

But I think there's another reason, perhaps as important, perhaps more so. The Ascension, more than most New Testament commemorations, is phrased in symbols with which we've lost contact. To understand the Ascension literally would make Jesus into a slow motion rocketeer. To understand the story as about Jesus zipping between solid ground and stratosphere is to trivialize it. The problem for the celebration of Ascension Day is that we live in a culture which doesn't know how to look beneath the surface of words. A church, once upon a time, was installing a series of stained glass windows celebrating the major events of the church's year. The oversight committee was looking at designs -- and here's a design for a window with a pair of feet. The committee couldn't make heads or tails of it and so asked the designer, "What is this? What day of the church's year is that?" Answer: "That's the Ascension. Those are the feet of Jesus and the rest of him has already disappeared into the cloud." The committee, may their stars shine brightly, said, "Try again, with theology this time."

If not about traveling through space and disappearing physical bodies, then what's the story about? It uses physical imagery in its narrative. Jesus is here. Then he is gone. How do we approach spatial language so it becomes language of meaning? Ancient culture was closer to the oral roots of language than ours. We're used to language as something written, even worse, something which prints itself out on a computer screen. Sequential linearness is emphasized. The doubling back of images on themselves; the ability of images early in the story to jump from beginning to ending and change the meaning of both in the process; the ability of poetic language not just to ornament meaning, but to change it; the ability of images to reflect a layered collection of meanings in which a single image can apply on multiple levels so as to mean three different things at once, we're not trained to awareness of these things.

So what do we do with Ascension? How can we somehow penetrate this envelop of the literal to alter the faintly bizarre to the significant?

To begin, look at a couple of today's hymns. Sometimes, grasping what a hymn is about becomes much easier if you pay attention to the text without the music. So I suggest reading -- just reading -- the texts of hymns. So, back to our opening hymn, #214 (*Hail the day that sees him rise*). At the beginning of verse four, the author of the hymn, Charles Wesley, says, "*Lord beyond our mortal sight, raise our hearts to reach thy height, there thy face unclouded see, find our heaven of heavens in thee.*" This is Wesley's interpretation of the Ascension: "Beyond our mortal sight

raise our hearts . . .” To him the Ascension connects Jesus’ story to the life of the church, it is the physical symbol of the transcendent. Seen this way the stanza begins to make sense. It raises not only Jesus, but also our hearts, the heart of the body of Christ. “Beyond our mortal sight raise our hearts to reach your height . . .” Part of the work of God has been left to the church. We must realize that we, ourselves are not true human beings. We are imperfectly human. It is the height of Jesus which is the perfection of humanity. The goal is that our being reaches the height of Jesus’ being. The invisibility of a particular form of humanity, Jesus of Nazareth in Palestine 2000 odd years ago, allows the universality of the humanity of Jesus to be a goal for all believers.

I frequently hear the phrase, “Well, it’s only human.” Generally it’s asserted from a rather defensive posture. From the Christian point of view such imbecilities, sins, and lacks of love denoted as ‘only human’ make us less than human. When we meet the standard of Jesus we have become fully human. It is the task of the church to remind us, gently but firmly, that we aren’t yet what we should and can be and that the life of the Christian is about change, constant change, into his likeness. The humanity of Jesus does not become our humanity through the singing of sentimental songs, the maintenance of glorious traditions, and the satisfaction of “spiritual needs” or even through devotion to an institutionally effective church. It’s the church’s job to remind us that after we have realized we are imperfectly human our task is not to transcend humanity, but to complete humanity in ourselves and in those we have been given to love. (Attempts to transcend humanity lead to disaster – totalitarianism, in which the human is at the disposal of the state and rules, whether bureaucratic or moral, rupture the human.)

The Ascension is the assertion, in narrative form, that the humanity of Jesus is available as the adequate model for all humanity: male/female, Jew/Greek, this social class or that social class, this economic group and that one. It is the humanity of Christ which is our model.

Congregational Comment: In the Old Testament, Elijah is taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. Is there any parallel there to Christ’s Ascension?

Let’s put it this way: the parallel was made. You can bet your bottom dollar that the early church would not have let something like that go by without drawing a parallel. So, yes, a parallel was drawn. The key is to realize that the Ascension is a statement about Jesus as the universal model for our humanity, not the giver of laws or of theologies, but the modeler of the human.

Here’s how it works. Jesus is our model. Now, if you have your model in the palm of your hand so you can measure it with calipers, or constantly at your disposal to watch and record its actions, then you can model yourself upon it in an imitative and mechanical way. But if your model is something which has, as the Ascension gospel puts it, departed from you, then the model becomes the creative memory which remains in your heart. In the absence of Christ from us but his presence with God we can experience the humanity of Christ as universal. As Paul states in one of his letters, **all** excellences are found in him. In his bodily absence the possibility of all bodies achieving their fullness in imitation of him becomes real.

So, instead of just doing what Jesus did, which would make most of us nearly useless, we seek to live out not a copy of Christ, but to be to our time what he was to his. We cannot state, in

abstractions, what the content of that imitation is to look like. To state it is to box it up and gift wrap it and then it is confined, not free; focused on specific events rather than universal. And the point to the Ascension is that the spirit of God is no longer confined. It can reach anywhere; it can be sought and detected in anyone. There is no new thing which can come into the world to which that spirit cannot be related and in which Jesus cannot be found. In good things he encourages their expansion and development. In evil ones he offers alternatives and discipline.

So, “raise our hearts to reach thy height.” That height is always beyond what we can see now; it is always the ascended Christ. I’m finally learning that not only are some things not what they seem, but almost everything is not what it seems. This is true of human beings. They change in most peculiar ways. They are amazingly successful at hiding themselves. We are amazingly successful at misunderstanding each other. There is always more possibility than is apparent on the surface. If we think that who people are is just what we see with our mortal sight we will never appreciate each other’s humanity and our love will be consequently maimed. In them we must see the specific and unique presence of the absent Christ; we must see the result of the Ascension.

So the Ascension isn’t Jesus going up like a rocket. The implication of this narrative is profoundly entwined with the task of the church. If we take Jesus as the model human being, then what he is is what each of us might be and what each of us might be is what we are called to seek in each other. At the last, the locale of Jesus, of the concrete, historical Jesus, is every human face.

That’s the first way of understanding the Ascension. Now a few comments on the gradual hymn, “Bright the cloud and bright the glory” (New Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Carl P. Daw, Jr. Hope Publishing, 1996) The author’s name has been cut off my copy.

Lucy: It’s Carl Daw.

OK. Carl Daw, who is a good Episcopalian, so if you felt comfortable with the hymn that’s natural, he’s one of us.

I call your attention to the second and third verses. The first verse is a standard description of the Biblical account not of the Ascension but of the Transfiguration. In verse two we find an inverted image of humanity which shows what it becomes when unformed by the Christic vision. Notice that I don’t say unformed by the church’s teachings. That’s a far more limited perspective. “Bright the cloud but dark the glory wrought by human enterprise . . .” Now what’s the image that jumps into your mind?

Congregation: Atomic power.

Exactly. Notice that when humans move toward the anti-image of their true selves they are not fixed in a single form. There are lots of ways in which humans instantiate this image of inverted, dark glory. The potential misuse of atomic power is only one possible inversion of the glory of God in human beings. All kinds of things have come to us posing as angles of light but have turned into something else. Every politician who has a scheme for the solution of the problems of our society falls into this category. I’m offering you this bright hope, elect me and it

will happen. It is nonsense. I'm waiting for one to say, "Until you folks who are going to elect or not elect me figure out how to love each other we're not going to get anything done that's for real." I'm waiting to hear that.

Let's look at the third verse. *"From the cloud and from the glory human need brought Jesus down: down to death, then from death rising to receive a victor's crown. Lead us, Christ, to prize compassion more than might, wealth, or renown."* It is a question not just of policies, but also of values, of our own inner orientations and lives. *"Help us change, help us change, that we may never be the same."*

This is my last point. Christians, for the most part, value the past. Without it there are whole aspects of Jesus, of God, that simply disappear. So we value the past. Yet we can't live there. We can't just copy it or return to it. There is always going on in the background the refrain of Carl's hymn: "Help us change, help us change, that we may never be the same." We have always this humanity of Jesus to live up to, which is always beyond our grasp and out of our sight. We always need to be facing our own incompleteness, we need to have that incompleteness filled with being. The task of loving each other is to recognize how the other person is going about filling his or her emptiness with being and then giving our support to that. This struggle to love in concrete and unique ways is never ending.

If there were no symbol such as the Ascension, then we would probably have a copycat form of Christianity. Here's the model, in the New Testament. Copy that and everything will be fine. But it won't. There were no organs in the New Testament so we would have no Bach. There are no choirs, so no Messiah. There are no hospitals in the New Testament and we would be deprived of an important mode of expressing compassion. Mere copying loses an unimaginable richness.

The task is to respect, value and learn from the past, know it and live out of it. But always so that Carl's refrain is heard behind our knowledge and love of the past: "Help us change, help us change, that we may never be the same."

That's that.