

The Feast of the Ascension runs a significant risk of disappearing in a confusion between metaphor and history: all those images of upness and departure and so little agreement on descriptive fact. I recall one fortunately rejected proposal for a set stained glass windows in which the major events of the Jesus story were to be depicted. One window design showed a pair of feet disappearing into a cloud. The committee asked, “What is this?” The reply was, “The Ascension. Jesus is going into the cloud.” This design was, with grateful thanks for the work which went into it, refused. And with reason, for it confuses metaphoric purpose with history.

Now, what is going on in the story of the Ascension? We gain a first insight from the story’s being told in strikingly different ways in different places in the New Testament. In one case Jesus ascends (apparently physically) and the cloud, always the symbol of the presence of God, receives him. (Note that to be “received” is much more personal than to “disappear.”) (Act 1:9) Another simply says, “He departed from them.” (Luke 24:51) No visual props here.

Now, whenever in the New Testament you find radically different images used to talk about the same event, it is clear that an invitation has been issued to, if you will, stand on the image as a vantage point from which to see into the event. If you confuse the platform upon which you’re asked to stand in order to see with what you ought to be looking at, it’s a major confusion. Between you, me and the lamp post, it is the common fundamentalist error. But that’s not the point to this sermon, so we’ll keep this a passing comment. One difficulty in the interpretation of scripture is to figure out what we ought to be looking at and what we ought to be standing on.

OK. I think we should start from a line in the first hymn, because the very last idea presented in the very last verse of *Hail the Day that sees him rise (Hymnal 1982, #214)*, is that we find our heaven of heavens in Christ. Not, mind you, in a place, but in a relationship with a person. Not in a place, but in a relationship. And so the Ascension is, in at least one sense, a kind of ground clearing event, so that we don’t always have to be looking for some person in the past to worship. This is a danger in the search for the historical Jesus in many of its forms: one looks for someone in the past to worship. And Christianity has always said, “OK the historical Jesus is real and central and we have to pay attention to him.” That’s why the work all these scholars are doing is important.

But it is not the historical Jesus alone which is the object of Christian worship. That’s where mistakes frequently come in. It is the living Christ. To use traditional language, what is worshiped is Christ as the second person of the Trinity, not Christ as Jesus of Nazareth. That which we worship needs to be inclusive, in all its aspects, of the past (the historical Jesus), the present (the experience of Christ in our hearts and communities now), and of the future, because without the future we have no idea which direction to try to steer the ship, either of our own souls or of the Christian community. And a point to which the church needs to pay attention is: what kind of vision do we, as a body, hold for our future? Do we have one more honorable than either mere survival or growth in numbers? Do we have one of seeking beauty, holiness, wisdom, compassion?

The American dream (survival/unlimited growth) dressed up in the clothing of Christian language is not a worthy goal for Christ's people.

So, Charles Wesley, who wrote Hymn 214 which we just sang, had it right. As he frequently did, by the way. We find our "heaven of heavens" in the humanity of the resurrected Jesus. It is not the dream of growth which should be ours, but the dream of seeing, unclouded, the face of God.

The point to the Ascension is that it makes possible a relationship with God which encompasses past, present and future. And it makes possible a relationship with Jesus which is not limited to an historical figure. Doctrinally speaking, the Ascension can be approached as the universalizing of the possibilities for our relationship with the historical Jesus.

Now, the second point I'd like to make, we get at from the Ascension Day Collect. You've heard me hold forth on collects before. They will give you, if you pay attention to them, an education in the theology of the Anglican tradition which simply cannot be matched in any other way. In fact, in my nastier moments, I sometimes think that for seminary theology classes we ought to throw out all those thick systematic theologies and ask students to spend an entire semester analyzing the collects in the Book of Common Prayer. I only say that because I'm a nasty curmudgeon.

Notice that the first phrase of the collect states the fact/symbol of the Ascension: "Almighty God, whose blessed son our savior Jesus Christ ascended far above all heavens ..." (Note that "above all heavens" means above all places, already despatializing the image.) And then, the reason why: "... that he might fill all things." In other words, this is not a disappearing act. This is not just a way to get Jesus off stage when his physical presence becomes an embarrassment. The purpose behind the doctrine is to allow Christ to be universally present: "... that he might fill all things . . ." Not some things, not just good things, but all things.

"Mercifully give us faith to perceive that according to his promise he abides with his church on earth." Now, that's an important prayer because, especially for those of you who have been lurking around churches long enough to realize their particolored nature, it's important that we pray that Jesus abides with the church and that we be able to perceive him there because, sometimes, folks, it's not easy. Sometimes the church discourages its members from finding Jesus there, sometimes the church today acts no differently from that ancient synagogue in Galilee which rejected the word Jesus brought. (Mark 6:1-6)

There is some virtue, some foundation for the Christian life, in persevering in the use of the instruments God has given us to know him. Not to be, if I may put it this way, fickle or flippant in the use of these things. This is why the Episcopal church has always been exceedingly cautious in the revision of its liturgies. One needs to be cautious in approaching change in ways of knowing God. One also needs to be bold when change is called for. All things reach a time when they no longer do what they were first designed to do. Then, if God is to continue to be known by this means, the means must change. (For an interesting account of conditions justifying change in liturgy, read the **Introduction** to the Book of Common Prayer.)

It takes more wisdom than I've got to know when to be cautious in approaching change and when to be bold. That's why the church is a collective body.

So it's important to have the faith to perceive this Christ who is, according to the Ascension, universal, to perceive him in the particular activities of the church. This requires prayer because sometimes to perceive Christ in the life of the church requires supernatural assistance.

The last stanza of the hymn we just sang addresses this issue of change. "Help us change, help us change, that we may never be the same." (*Bright the cloud and bright the glory* by Carl Daw, in Sing to the Lord No Threadbare Song, Selah Publishing, 2001) First, a general comment on this and then an application to the Christian life.

General comment: the Christian life is a constant dialogue between preservation and change. We have a duty to conserve the tradition and we have a duty to change it. The lynchpin which determines both preservation and change, is, under all circumstances, what speaks to our hearts of the presence of Jesus and not of something else. So what do we do with this tension between change and preservation? All things in the church are to point to Christ. If we preserve a doctrine, what we save is to point to Christ. If we change it, the change is to point to Christ. If we continue to use a particular worship pattern, the question is always, how, for this community, does this pattern enable the recognition of the presence of Jesus? If we change doctrine or worship, the question is always the same, how does this open us to the presence of Jesus?

Of course there are problems. How do we tell the presence of Jesus from the presence of something else? But the difficulty of answering a question does not determine the validity of asking it.

In back of this attempt to relate preservation and change is the apprehension that Christianity is a transformative religion. (A perception I keep harping on, probably to the point of irritation.) If we think that we can be who we are now and also be fully in the presence of God, we are mistaken. God sent Jesus to us, in order that we might be transformed. Therefore, to see Christianity as a religion of preservation, as a religion designed to make sure that we hew to the path of our fathers and mothers, is ultimately mistaken. Christ calls us to become something which we have never been before: a new people. That's not Jon Goman language, that's Bible language. You don't get to that sort of newness without being transformed nor do you get there simply by conserving the past. So in thinking of the doctrine of the Ascension, of the event, if we can even call it an event, the question is: What is the transformative purpose of this?

Now, mind you, this is a question which can be addressed to all doctrines. If someone says, "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?", one significant response could be, "What transformative power do you expect my belief to secure?" This is sometimes forgotten – as I asked in another church, long, long ago and far, far away, when was the last time the doctrine of the Virgin Birth changed your life? And if you have no answer, why are we holding the doctrine? Either find an answer or go looking for something else to believe. If it doesn't change you, so that you more easily recognize the face of Christ in your neighbor, then what does it have to do with God's call into his kingdom? Just a trivial question to chew on as you mow the grass.

For the hymn to ask God to help us change is right in line with what the Ascension is about. The Ascension is a doctrine which says, to use old fashioned and traditional language, the creation is called to heaven. As Christ ascends, he ascends as a whole being and that means that his humanity ascends as well as his divinity. The Ascension is not just an act of, if you will, the divine aspect of Jesus (That would get us into all sorts of ancient heresies that are exceedingly complex and difficult. Therefore I don't want to talk about them because I'm not feeling complex and difficult this morning.) The key is that the Ascension is the doctrine which states where our humanity is called. Our humanity is called to follow Jesus. We're used to that expression, but we tend to think of it in a this worldly, primarily moral way. But if we are truly called to follow Jesus, then we're called to follow him in his ascent to heaven. It is our humanity which is called by God to be able to see him face to face and be his friend. That is the destiny that God desires both for his church and for his creation. That is what the doctrine of the Ascension is about. It is the future part of Christ's existence as past, present and future. It is the "He is to come." of the three fold identification of the Christ in Revelation: "He who was, he who is and he who is to come." We find the same three fold identification in our liturgy: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." (Revelation 1:4 and others) The reason why there is disagreement in the gospels about the historical circumstances of the Ascension is that it's not about history. It's about our calling. It's not about where we've been, but about where we are called to go. We are called to follow Jesus into that relation with God in which God forgives all things, directs all things, loves all things, treasures all things and accepts all things; into that relationship with him which gives us eternal life because to have eternal life is to be related to God, to be remembered by God, to be addressed by God.

That's eternal life.

Just one footnote and I'm done. We don't have to be aware of God's address to us in order for that address us to be real. God talks to the stones in the street and the only reason they continue to exist is because he addresses them. All things are in the basket of God's concern. Nothing is excluded. The whole of creation is treasured and God desires the perfection of the whole of creation and that means it *all* has somewhere to go. The Ascension is saying, "Ok, you folks in the church. In the midst of figuring out how to meet your budgets, how to get along with the person next to you in the pew, always remember that you are called to follow Jesus into a face to face relationship with God. Ultimately, that's what every single vestry meeting ought to be about.

That's enough of that. Please stand for the creed.