

**12 May 2013, Easter 7, Sunday after Ascension Day**

**Psalm 97.**

**Acts 16: 16-34**

**Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21**

**John 17: 20-26**

Last week you heard in the sermon about God the creator of the cosmos, the hand that flung stars into space. You heard this in the context of the big bang, and the idea that the laws of physics are part of God. This week it's the splendour God. In the reading from Acts, and the psalm, we hear of God's mighty acts of exorcism and power. More big bang if you like.

Between these two Sundays, on Thursday we celebrated the Ascension. Some people find the Ascension embarrassing. How can you believe, they say, that someone went to heaven, disappearing from view, feet disappearing through the clouds? A celestial stair lift. Some people find this even more difficult to deal with than the idea of Jesus rising from the dead. It's easy to ridicule Christian doctrine if you take everything literally.

So, don't take it literally. Think instead of the symbolic meaning—of what the story means for you and me.

Think of phrases we use:

- aiming for the stars
- scaling the heights

This is what Ascension is about.

Think of the Ascension as Christmas in reverse. At Christmas we celebrate the Divine Lord coming in human form. Heaven to earth. Through Jesus' life we have Divine and human fused, experiencing all human pains and pleasures. At the Ascension, all this human experience is taken back to the source of Divinity. It was the wounded Jesus who ascended, taking with him all the pains as well as the pleasures of human life. All our human life is made divine.

St Irenaeus was a 4th century Bishop of Lyons, and one of his lines is: God became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is. Think about that.

In the Christmas Gospel, St John says something similar: as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.

Another of St Irenaeus' sayings is: The glory of God is a living person, and the life of man fully alive is the vision of God.

The message of the Ascension is that our lives, lived to the full, are a vision of God. By living life to the full we 'ascend' toward the heights of divinity, aiming for the stars, scaling the heights. And that is something reflected in today's Gospel, Jesus says: Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, *may be with me where I am*, to see my glory. The splendour and power of God is seen in the splendour and power of a human life lived to the full.

See yourself as a hot air balloon powered by the fire of the Divine Lord. What does the balloonist do to become airborne?

- turns up the heat (the fire of the Lord)
- chucks out the weights and cuts the ropes that tether to the ground.

Turning up the heat can be left to next week, Pentecost, when fire and flames are part of the liturgical story. Today, think about chucking out the stuff that weighs us down and tethers us to the ground.

- There are things we do that we wish we didn't. These weigh us down. There are things we want to do but never get round to. This weights us down. St Paul knew all about these when he said that he knew what he should do but often couldn't manage it, and found himself doing the things he knew he shouldn't.
- There are things we carry with us that weigh us down: shame, regrets, guilt. Confess them – bring them to the surface, tell someone else. This is what people often do when they know they are dying. It is always a relief.
- There is pride that makes us think we are better than other people, or that other people or groups or races matter less than we do.
- There is pride that prevents us seeing ourselves as we are.
- This pride is not the sort of pride that we take in someone's achievement, but the pride of hubris – pride and arrogance that shows a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one's own competence or capabilities. We see it in politicians, in bankers. We see it in people who take delight in shaming and humiliating others. When we think we are better than others we tend to think ill of them, and this leads to ills of society such as abuse, sectarianism, theft, stealing.

So there are these things to chuck out of the balloon.

We can also help the balloon to rise by giving things away. We can share our gifts and our love with others. The interesting thing about giving these away is that no matter how much we give away, the reservoir always seems to have more left in it. And these things seem to be weightless! In the words of St Peter: *Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it. Be content with who you are, and don't put on airs.* As we work on this generous giving and sharing, we ascend towards the divine. This is not something we do by pretending we are better than others but by accepting ourselves as we are and sharing ourselves with others. Isn't that what Jesus did? he knew what he was and he shared himself with others, at great cost.

The whole point of the Ascension is to help us to realise that we approach the divine when we are fully human, each of us playing to our strengths and giving to the world what only each one of us can give.

Man fully alive is the Glory of Creation. The divine light is in us all, and as St Matthew has it, *Let your light so shine that all may see it and glorify your father in heaven.* The Ascension is inside us, the kingdom of God is inside us.

Don't worry about showing off: *we are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.* (Marianne Williamson)

This is why we need the Ascension: to rekindle, restore our sense of hope in a world where we hear and see too much of the nastiness of humanity.

The splendour of God is the splendour of man. This is a great gospel for inspiring us for the future.

### **Hear also what Bishop Lancelot Andrewes saith on Christmas Day 1605**

It is most kindly to take part with Him in that which He took part in with us, and that, to no other end, but that He might make the receiving of it by us a means whereby He might "dwell in us, and we in Him;" He taking our flesh, and we receiving His Spirit which He imparteth to us; so we by His might become "partakers of the Divine nature."