

Ascension Day 2009

Russia, Eastern Europe. So many churches dedicated to ascension and transfiguration. Here: fewer than 40 (cf over 500 to Holy Trinity).

Are we afraid of this great festival? Too poetical, too romantic, too conceptual, too abstract perhaps for the prosaic Anglo-Saxon mentality? Or what?

This is my take on the Ascension

Ascension – the cosmic event

- *Place and time limited.* We can see the Christian story as a saga of the making good of humanity. Divine approval given to being humanity by God taking human form and flesh and entering into all human experience, birth to death and all stations between, happiness, sadness, victim, death. These events took place at *one time* and in *one place*.
- *Place unlimited:* The resurrection moves all this outside the confines of *place* as Our Lord appears to the disciples, apparently haphazardly.
- *Time unlimited:* And the Ascension makes the Christ-event available to the entire cosmos, now outside time as well. To all, in every place, throughout time. From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same; from the big bang with Holy Wisdom in the stardust to the future, whatever that may mean. As the Eucharist concentrates all salvation history into the consecration prayer, so Ascension is a kind of cosmic counterpart that makes Christ Jesus available to all and in all, the bursting of the risen Lord into the cosmos. Entropy reversed.

Ascension – the personal event

God took human form at the incarnation, and now today we celebrate humanity—the risen Lord—being taken back into the Godhead. God returns to Godself, goes deep inside himself before sending another comforter, another strengthener to inspire us. This journey into Godself is a model for the way in which we can journey into ourselves—we *must* journey into ourselves—the better to equip ourselves for service. This is a call to searing self-examination and prayer, the better to gain wisdom and insights in the service of others.

Christ's teaching is for me profoundly psychologically authentic. A personal journey, a journey into oneself, and paradoxically the more one goes into oneself, the more one is free from oneself, and free of oneself. It is painful, as the crucifixion was. The *blackening* of the forge (Jung's *nigredo*) before the transformation to new creation. Personal blackening, personal crucifixion, personal resurrection, personal ascension as we learn to fly. Yes fly – then we become *unlimitedly* available for service to others, as Christ was *unlimited* by the Ascension, and aware of not imposing oneself on others, as Christ never did. It is a leaving behind of self, just as Christ left behind human flesh. An ascension beyond self.

Ascension – the salvation event

We are human beings. Primates (apes not archbishops). There is nothing shameful about this. If there were, why would the Ineffable God have taken the trouble—and what trouble—to become one? God in Christ Jesus took on all our experience, and at the Ascension all this was lifted up into the Godhead. Even our hurts—the signs of being human. The ascended Christ is the wounded Christ (stained glass window), the wounded healer, insulted, spat at, nailed, kicked, beaten, thirsty. By his stripes, his wounds, we are healed—and it is through our brokenness, our woundedness, that we can act as channels of healing for others. We do not need to pretend to be what we're not—that's the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden where they tried to cover up who they were. Humanity with all its imperfections is divinized: 'God became man so that man might become divine'—the interpenetration of divine and human.

Rising above is always a metaphor for release, for a yearning (eros) for better things. Such yearnings are part of the human condition. An abused young man I know aches for better things, and talks in just such terms to look forward to a better life. So ascension as something to aim for.

With Thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously
And sing this day Thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

God became man in order to raise man to God. The ascension marks the end of the work Christ came on earth to do. Christ ascends and takes human-ness with him. The Ascension unites earth to heaven,

humanity to Godhead, humanness to divinity: sanctification, divinisation, redemption, call it what you will.

At the beginning I asked how can we explain so few churches dedicated to the Ascension?

Maybe we are too obsessed with the puritan mentality of the BCP, miserable sinners and so on. Maybe we wallow too much in self-flagellation. This is self-obsession. Maybe we are too obsessed with what we are saved from, harping on about the misery of the cross. We need to lift our eyes to what we are saved to: the glory and splendour of the Ascension.

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, where we hear of people who ignore that longing for the divine, who shut it out. We need this when we hear the bad news that the media seem to like to concentrate on.

Very soon we will be receiving HC so that 'he might dwell in us, and we in Him.' A 17th century Bishop wrote of this: '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. (Andrewes). This is what the Ascension is all about.

God the Logos became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is. The glory of God is a living person and the life of man is the vision of God.

Glory to you all, now and always.