

**Year A, Easter 7, Sunday after Ascension
Derby Cathedral Eucharist**

Acts 1:6-14

I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

Let us pray.

O Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, eternal Wisdom, inspire my words to illuminate the mystery of the Godhead for the minds of them that hearken. Amen

It is good to be here – thank you for allowing me to come once again. Earlier this week, I thought I wouldn't make it because on Monday I was lying in theatre in DRI fully conscious with at least three things like skewers stuck into my left eyeball for surgery for a detaching retina. For the last few days I've been wandering round seeing things as if through a glass not darkly or dimly but waterlily and vaguely; with only the promise of restitution of clear vision at a time to be determined not by me, but by God—and I mean of course the ophthalmic surgeon.

This ain't a bad image for the Christian life, as others far more eminent than I have said. But it's also a pretty good message for this time of year. I'm a great fan of the festival of the Ascension, last Thursday. When I'm Archbishop of Canterbury I'll declare Ascension to be always on a Sunday so that its celebration is not just a matter of the faithful few fighting bravely against the attractions of Thursday evening shopping, or bookgroup, or pilates or whatever. It's a great festival because, like the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, it lifts our minds to what we are saved to – glory, radiance, joy—rather than concentrating, as Christians so often seem to, on gloom and guilt about what we are saved *from*.

- I meet Christians who say we are saved by the cross: not I.
- I meet Christians who say we are saved by the resurrection: not I.
- I meet Christians who say we are saved by the cross *and* resurrection: not I.

I say we are saved by the whole process from creation through incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to the coming of the spirit at what I still call Whitsuntide, next week, at which we are born again, and after which we can be born again and again every time we recognise the Holy Spirit at work within us: a kind of re-incarnation of divine wisdom at work within us again and again and again.

This is the salvation process for me, and it assumes at least two things.

First, a recognition that we are human beings. Plantigrade primates—that is, apes not archbishops. We need not pretend to be anything else. Holy Scripture tells us that in today's readings: Be glad of who and what you are **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.** Epistle

Don't put on airs. Don't put on church faces. Be yourself, and if the churchy hypocrites tell you off about it, give 'em the two word intellectual answer.

There is nothing shameful about being a plantigrade primate, a human being. If there were, why would the Ineffable God have taken the trouble—and what trouble—to become one? God in becoming Christ Jesus took on all our experience, and at the Ascension all this was incorporated into the Godhead, all our humanity, all human experience. Even eye operations. Even our hurts—the signs of being human. The Christ who ascended to the Godhead was the wounded Christ (stained glass window), the wounded healer, insulted, spat at, nailed, kicked, beaten, thirsty. Not some unreachable ideal. 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 are not—that's the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden where they tried to cover up who they were. The Christ who ascended is not someone who knew nothing of our human experience, but someone who wept and toiled and mourned and died. And loved. Humanity with all its imperfections is divinized: 'God became man so that man might become divine'—the interpenetration of divine and human.

This is how I read David Garnett's message in this month's Diocesan rag/redtop. The notion that the soul is good and the body is bad has perverted Western Christianity for too long, and has led to all sorts of abuses, flagellations. I see no need for it in early Christian doctrine: the humanity of the body is a good thing.

- All soul and no body—no good!

We have a duty to care for the body as well for the soul (if they are separable, which I doubt spiritually and biologically), we have a duty to look after ourselves, we have a duty to enjoy life, to make the most of what has been put at our disposal—this is the talents parable. Without delight we're in hell, and we

have a duty to pursue delight, and—here's the difficult bit—do all in our power to allow everyone else to do so as well.

So to enjoy being human, to enjoy being what we are, and not put on airs and graces, is the first assumption on which my notion of salvation rests.

The other assumption is that we have in us a longing for something else. And I'm certain we all have this hole within. Some people go to football matches for it. Some people long for chocolate. Some people go shopping—and we see the agony when suddenly it dawns that shopping power is being curtailed by economic circumstance. But everything fails to satisfy what Schopenhauer calls "a certain trace of silent sadness... a consciousness that results from knowledge of the vanity of all achievements and of the suffering of all life, not merely one's own."

A certain trace of silent sadness—the God-shaped hole within. If you like Wagner operas you might see this God shaped hole in the character of Hans Sachs. Or in the Tristan chord—longing, eros.

Some of us call this the inclination to the divine. I think it is in our every cell, put there as a result of the divine-human exchange that took place in Mary's uterus as she nurtured the growing embryonic Lord within her. We are God's, we belong to God, we are of the divine, from the moment of creation. We need to let this urge for the divine, flower through prayer and meditation and worship—and enjoyment of life. Our response is to hearken to it: a word that carries with it a sense of listening, certainly, but also one of acting in accordance with what we hear: aligning our will with the divine will. It's a difficult job amidst all the static we get from consumerism and the evils of advertising, but we bash on in hope.

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. I need it a time when I am curdled by what I hear from Amstetten in the Danube valley, or from Bacup in Lancashire.

To end, I hope these lovely words of two favourite writers will inspire and comfort us as we celebrate the holy mysteries and engage in the wonderful exchange of the eucharist.

Hear what comfortable words St Irenaeus saith:

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.

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."