

ASCENSIONTIDE
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD 2017

On Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension. It used to be a primary feast of the church, but is now largely forgotten. This week I was wondering why this is the case. Well I think it is because it can be a problematic image for us modern people.

There is something about the Ascension which can almost make us chuckle. The image of Jesus flying off into the sky which we are given in our Acts reading today. If we think too hard about it, it may not be a helpful image, and can perhaps take away from what is really important about Ascension. The idea that Jesus departs so that his disciples may embody him in their lives and ministries. The image can also perhaps take away from what would have been a very sad occasion for those first Christians.

And so it may be strange that Jesus parting from his disciples is marked by joy and worship as we celebrate this Eucharist today. One would have expected a desire on the part of the disciples to have him stay. But this parting is different it

seems, as is so much about Jesus life. There is a curious paradox about Jesus parting from the disciples. Jesus parting is to bring about his presence. If Jesus stays, he could only be in one place at a time. This parting means he can be for all people at all times

The feast of the Ascension is a strange one for us to cope with. The story tells us Jesus took the disciples out of Jerusalem, said farewell, told them to go back to the city and wait for the Spirit. Then he went up into the clouds and vanished. Because of the space age we live in, we know people don't do that. However as I said we need to remind ourselves of the teaching behind the events.

3

Two things need to be said about the details of the story.

First there is the cloud. In scripture cloud appears often. There was a pillar of cloud which went

before the Israelites at the Exodus. Cloud covered the mountain at Sinai when Moses went up to receive the Ten Commandments. Cloud covered the mountain when Jesus took Peter James and John up Mt Tabor and Jesus was transfigured. The cloud is a common image for God's presence. In each case the cloud was simply saying God is present here. When Jesus goes into the cloud at the Ascension it's about him entering the presence of God. This is not about Jesus heading off like a space ship. It is about Jesus going into God's presence.

4

Secondly there is Jesus going up. This does not necessarily mean that Jesus lifted off the earth either. We also use the phrase "going up" to mean going up in the world or going up the ladder of success. This is not about distance away from, but about a change of status or importance.

So these images used at the Ascension tell us that Jesus is in the presence of God and he has a new status. If this is the case, then there are some important things which stem from this teaching.

Jesus in his resurrected body has gone into the presence of God. The human and divine are connected in a new way in Jesus. This feast reminds us again of the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

This tells us about the importance of the human body to God.

5

It is strange that the church seems to have had such a problem with bodies. There have been many occasions when we have been taught to deny the body and concentrate on the spirit. Yet the only way we can express the spiritual is through the physical body. On the other hand the sacraments of the church are all about the body. Baptism is about washing the body. Eucharist is

feeding the body, unction is anointing the body, and marriage is the joining of bodies. This is not to deny the spiritual component of the sacraments, but simply to say sacraments are physical as well as spiritual. They work through our bodies.

And if God was willing to take human form in the body of Jesus then that says something very important about human embodiment.

6

Clearly we are not simply human body, we are also divine body. For the Ascension tells us that Jesus takes our humanity into the presence of God. In Jesus the human and the divine are connected. And if we, through our baptism are made one with Christ, and through our participation in the Eucharist we receive the body of Christ, then we too are human and divine. So what we do with our bodies becomes very significant. And because we are embodied

creatures that is why parting from the body produces sadness and grief.

7

When the disciples mourned because of Jesus death they were mourning the loss of the body of their friend. After the Ascension the disciples were no longer the dejected group mourning the loss of their leader. They returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God, we are told. The departure of their leader doesn't seem to produce the sadness we would expect at a parting. What they came to realize was that by going Jesus was closer to them than if he had stayed.

As well as the Ascension telling us that humanity is taken into divinity which we share, it also reminds us that endings are also new beginnings. The Ascension of Jesus asks us to look at another aspect of all our partings, of all we leave behind. There is sadness to be sure and we need not neglect that feeling and other feelings that occur at parting. But partings can also open up new possibilities. Life in the future

can even be as good, if not better than the past. It's a matter of letting the past be the past and letting it go.

8

Each of us holds on to things of the past or people of the past. Sometimes we are not willing to let go of old hurts and grievances. Maybe we are not willing to let go of a relationship that has in fact finished. Perhaps we are not willing to let go of what is secure and comfortable. What is difficult for us to grasp is that sometimes letting go can mean we have more, not less. Letting go can mean new freedom and greater joy.

This Ascension, consider the things you hold on to but know it really would be best to let them go.

The Ascension of Jesus is our invitation to let go the unnecessary things we hold on to. It is also a time to consider our bodies and how we use them, divine and human.

To quote Lord Byron

“But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,

Half dust, half deity,
alike unfit
To sink or soar.”
“Become nature's divine call”

Amen