

'He ascended into Heaven' – Really?

1 Kings 8:12-13, 27-30

Acts 1:6-12

'He descended into hell;

The third day he rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty.'

Those three short sentences lie at the heart of the creed that some of you find yourselves saying on Tuesday evenings, and they confront us with enormous difficulties. It is no wonder that they are dismissed as nonsense by many. What upon earth does it mean to say that Christ descended, rose and ascended? These three statements are expressed in the mythological language of the ancient world, when people believed that they lived on a flat earth, with heaven up there, and Hades – or hell – down below. If Christ had died, then he had joined the dead, who disappeared into Hades; if he had been raised from the dead, then he was seen again on earth; and if he had returned to God the Father, then he must have ascended to God in heaven. That was the three-decker universe in which they believed they lived.

When I was a small girl – which, as you all know, was a *very* long time ago – we used to sing a hymn which began ‘There’s a friend for little children, above the bright blue sky’. Any educational psychologists among you will be able to tell me whether or not it is wise to encourage children to use mythological language in this way, for when they grow up they are likely to discard not only the literal but the metaphysical meaning as well. You may have noticed, however, that Charles Wesley used very similar ideas in the hymn we sang just now – though in far more sophisticated language – when he described Jesus as ‘parted from our sight, high above yon azure height’. And though Wesley belonged to a far less astronomically-educated age than our own, I am quite sure that he did not believe that the throne to which he says Christ returned was literally perched somewhere up above on a cloud.

This is the language of myth – but myth does not, as we are by now all aware, refer to something untrue, but rather is an attempt to express truth in picture-language. The Russian leader Nikita Krushchev famously declared that the first cosmonaut, Gargarin, had flown in space but seen no God there. Of course he hadn’t, since God is not to be found sitting on an azure throne or even on a cloud. But the

imagery is powerful, nevertheless. Myth is the language which serves to describe the indescribable.

After all, even Solomon, centuries before Christ was born, knew perfectly well that 'heaven and the highest heaven' could not contain the God whom he worshipped. He nevertheless addressed his prayers to him with the words 'Hear in heaven your dwelling place'. And though Solomon built a Temple which could in a sense be regarded as the earthly dwelling-place of God, he realized that God was not confined to the Temple, since God was the God of the whole earth. Yet both the Temple and heaven acted as symbols of God's presence.



And so I come to my picture, which represents one of the glorious stained-glass windows in Fairford parish church, and the part of the window which concerns us is the third panel from the left. Almost the entire panel is taken up with what looks like a gigantic green mushroom, but is in

fact intended to represent the mountain from which Jesus is said to have ascended, though how anyone but an experienced rock climber armed with crampons and ropes could possibly have got to its top is not clear. Since the window is tall and thin so is the mountain, but its enormous height reminds us of the great distance between earth and heaven. It would seem that this mountain has served as a kind of giant rocket-launching pad, for at its foot are the 11 disciples, gazing up to heaven, and at the very top of the window is a black square – though whether this is meant to represent the black hole of the unknown into which Jesus is disappearing or the bottom of his clothing I am not sure. At the base of the black square, however, Jesus' two feet can clearly be seen dangling as he vanishes from view – to sit at the right hand of God.

The picture sums up all our problems with the imagery associated with the ascension. We do not believe in a heaven which is situated literally 'above the bright blue sky'; nor do we believe that Jesus is actually sitting up there, on a golden throne; so why should we believe that he ascended into heaven? In a scientific age we are embarrassed by such images, and wonder what to do with them. Many of our contemporaries mock what they mistakenly assume to be the naive beliefs of a bygone age.

Many people react in that way. But when they do, I suspect that it is they who are being naive. For I doubt very much whether the craftsmen who made that window expected us to take the story literally. If they did, they certainly failed to explain how Jesus ever got up onto the top of the mountain, in order to ascend to heaven. Was there perhaps an internal lift? A spiral staircase? These men were trying to express truth in pictures – they were using symbols.

In the same way, in the Bible itself the story of the ascension uses symbols in an attempt to help us to understand its meaning. The language it uses is the language of myth, and attempts to express truth in picture-language.

Now that's all very well, but one of the problems with the ascension is that if we're not very careful, we misinterpret the pictures; it's very easy to take the symbols at their face value, and when that happens we may find that the images convey all the wrong ideas. I want to suggest three ways in which we tend to misunderstand the meaning of the ascension.

First: in my window, the eleven disciples gaze after Jesus as he vanishes from their view; the ascension is a story

about Jesus leaving his disciples. Right? Wrong! At one level, of course, this *is* a story about Jesus going away. He disappears from sight. But the early Christians were insistent that the true significance of his going away was that Jesus was now *with* his disciples. As a man, living in Palestine, he could only be in one place at a time; as the exalted Lord, he could be present with everyone who believed in him. When Jesus left his disciples, we might perhaps expect him to say 'Good-bye'. But he doesn't. According to Matthew's version of the story, Jesus' last words to his disciples were: 'I will be with you always'. It looks like a going-away; it turns out to be the very reverse. Jesus hasn't been whisked off into time and space, but set free from the limitations of time and space; he's been made available to everyone.

Secondly, the story of the ascension is about heaven, and is therefore about something totally remote from our experience. Right? Wrong! In the Fairford window, to be sure, the disciples are gazing (with some astonishment) up into heaven. In Acts, Luke tells us that they gazed intently up into heaven and were finally brought down to earth, as it were, by two angelic figures, who asked them: 'Whatever are you gazing up into the sky for?' It is a common device used by the evangelists to point to the reality behind a story

by showing us the disciples doing and saying stupid things, so prompting us to think 'Oh – they've clearly got it wrong, so what does this story *really* mean?' And so it is here. Their business was not to gaze into heaven, but to get on with the task they had been given on earth. And some task it was! Matthew tells us that Jesus sent them to all the nations – in other words, he had handed over his work of proclaiming God's Kingdom to the disciples: it was up to them, now, to carry on his work of healing the sick, of helping those in need, of comforting those in sorrow, of bringing justice to the poor. It's no good gazing up into heaven. The task they have been given – that *we* have been given – couldn't have been more down to earth.

And finally, the ascension is a story about Jesus' enthronement in heaven at God's right hand in glory and power. Right? Right! But this is the point where the symbols can lead us wildly astray. To us, a throne suggests status and glory, and that is certainly what two of the disciples had in mind when they asked to sit next to Jesus when he was enthroned. And unfortunately, that seems to be how many of the world's leaders regard *their* position – namely as an opportunity to wield power and win glory. . . . A Russian leader, who regards building an Empire by conquest as his God-given right; a British politician, who

seeks popularity, and apparently believes that his role as leader of the nation is to encourage his officials by raising a glass at a so-called work-event which looks to many of us more like a wild party, and whose policies were endorsed by the British electors: two views of what power and glory mean.

Remember the crown on the empty throne in the House of Lords – intended as a symbol of royal approval for the Queen’s speech? The story of the ascension is clearly an attempt to say that Jesus has met with *divine* approval: though his people rejected him, *God* has vindicated him, and enthroned him at his right hand. But who is it whom he has vindicated? Someone who saw his kingship in terms of serving others and suffering a gruesome death. And what kind of glory and power is he now given? Jesus apparently interpreted glory in terms of love, self-giving and concern for others, not status, and exercised power through weakness. It's *that* Jesus who has been vindicated. In other words, God sets his seal of approval on Jesus' way of doing things – on his way of living and dying. But that does not mean that now things are reversed, and others serve him: it means rather that his pattern of serving others is endorsed as the true one for his followers.

It would seem, then, that those who suppose that one must take the symbols of the ascension literally miss its real significance. This is a story with a hidden meaning, just as parables are stories with hidden meanings. Parables have sometimes been described as earthly stories with heavenly meanings; but the ascension is a heavenly story with an earthly meaning. And its meaning is this: Jesus has not left his followers, but is *with* them, unconstrained by time and space; he has handed over to them responsibility for continuing his own work in his own way; and that way – the way of love, of service and suffering – has received the divine stamp of approval. In the kingdom of God, love, justice, righteousness and mutual concern are paramount. May God's kingdom come, and his will be done, on earth as in heaven.