

2016-05-05 The Feast of the Ascension St Mary's Primrose Hill

“And he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven”

Ascension Day is a magnificent and triumphant celebration of Christ's Kingship and enthronement in his proper place at the right hand of God the Father.

Star-gazing, the contemplation of the heavens, is much pondered in the scriptures. It was both a science and meditational practice. For the ancients the heavens were a mysterious realm and to some degree part of the heavenly court. Ancient Judaism was very oblique indeed about the location of heaven and the character of the afterlife. But Judaism's meeting with Hellenistic thought in the few centuries before Our Lord's birth, meant that some Greek notions of the ideal and heavenly realm placed it to some extent “up there”, which was both a physical place and a dimension of ideals and prototypes. The two (both Lucan) accounts of Jesus's Ascension, in Acts and Luke's Gospel, talk both of Jesus's ascent and his being taken from their view. Luke is sort of hedging his bets about precisely where Jesus has gone, up or away, or possibly both, or possibly not exactly either.

The year I was born, the first man walked on the moon. The heavens felt rather different after that, or certainly since human beings were able to observe the world from space. A recent film *Last Man on the Moon* traces the story of the last space walk, made by Eugene Cernan in 1972. If early exploration of the heavens had shattered the modern mind's concept of space as outer court of heaven itself, Cernan's account of what the whole effect of his space walk had on him and all around him, caused him at least quite a profound conversion of heart and life: a veritable Christian experience, but not because he had found himself nearer to the heavenly realm, but closer to himself and what life was really about.

Last year, two of our congregation left St Mark's to go to Theological College, we miss them greatly. One of the things at a Selection Conference ordinands have to do now is to do a short talk and then lead a discussion on it. To help them both prepare for their conference, Will and Ayla both presented a couple of subjects. We made an evening of it to simulate what it might feel like. It was a good evening. Will chose the slightly abstract but very intriguing subject: *Where is the body of Christ?* He began with a discussion of the Ascension. The departure of the risen Christ into heaven, the Ascent to the heavenly realm of the resurrected Body of Christ, he concluded is at once real and physical, spiritual, ecclesiological. The Ascension therefore must be seen as utterly bound up with the resurrection, as in a sense in the other Gospels it is more implicitly than in Luke, and must divert us from puzzling over a departure to the stars, and prepare us for an entry ourselves into the fullness of the mystery of God in our eventual resurrection with Christ.

Put another way, perhaps very basically, but in the 40 days of his resurrection appearances, where was the Body of Christ then, when invisible to his disciples? Was the Risen Lord lurking in Judaeen caves outside Jerusalem avoiding being seen? Or was he not already in some sense at God's right hand in glory?

The interval between Easter and the Ascension is to allow in these mystical 40 days which divide them, a season of realisation on the part of the disciples, and ourselves. Christ's new and resurrected life is not life as we know it, but the life of heaven itself, into which our frail form and nature is to be elevated, if that is how we need to think of it. The substance of our

flesh is taken into the very throne-room of God, alongside, within and between the persons of the Trinity. Christ as prophet, priest and king, calls us into his kingly existence.

At the heart of the drama of Christ's last hours is as each evangelist presents it, the trial before Pilate. Earthly and heavenly notions of kingship are contrasted. The temporal power is ironically at the mercy of the eternal reign. Judge is judged, as judged is judged.

Something of this is played out in Shakespeare's most wonderful play Richard II, which I went to see last night as an homage in this centenary year to William Shakespeare.

Not often done, the play explores the vicissitudes of power and powerful men, ending with Richard usurped, and, despite, vanity, weakness and self-delusion his final personal journey has a Christ-like aspect.

Act 4 Sc 1

God save King Harry, unking'd Richard says,
And send him many years of sunshine days!
What more remains?

Bolingbroke the equally conflicted usurper, recognising the self pity says:

The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy'd
The shadow of your face.

Richard replies:

Say that again.
The shadow of my sorrow! ha! let's see:
'Tis very true, my grief lies all within;
And these external manners of laments
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortured soul;
There lies the substance: and I thank thee, king,
For thy great bounty, that not only givest
Me cause to wail but teachest me the way
How to lament the cause.

Richard's journey is the opposite of a journey to the stars, aspects of it are very ugly, an ignominious humiliation, most deserved, but as he eventually relinquishes the crown, he has attained an eternal diadem.

The Body of Christ is in the throneroom of God, our journey there is the abandonment of self, all personal kingly might, self-absorption and reliance. Our ascent is born through loss and relinquishment.