

Sermon Sunday After the Ascension

May 16<sup>th</sup> 2010-05-13 Winchester Cathedral.

I have to say at the outset that I am not used to preaching sermons. The last time I gave a sermon was about 13 years ago in Oxford. The University there has two prescribed University Sermons to be given by Heads of Colleges. One is on the sin of pride; the other on the grace of humility. I was asked to give the sermon on the sin of pride. I asked the Vice Chancellor if I could give the sermon on humility instead. However he said that he thought that the sin of pride might suit me quite well and no doubt he shewed himself to be a shrewd judge of character. However today in addressing you all for the first time I need all my meagre resources of humility to have the nerve to do so.

I want to concentrate on the meaning of Christ's Ascension, the feast of which we celebrated on Thursday. No doubt there are many layers of meaning to this event but I want to concentrate on three things which have meant the most to me in thinking about it.

The first is the emphasis on the idea that the personhood of God is intrinsically linked to that of relationship. That in returning to his Father Jesus is completing a process which is built upon relationship and recognition. In completing this process through Jesus' ascension God becomes most fully what he is in this relationship. This idea that personhood develops and is completed in relationship rings true to our own experience. Personhood is not just some kind of pre-existing status, it is rather something which we have to develop in relationship with family, friends, teachers and so forth and in recognition by others.

This emphasis on relationship brings me to my second point that through his ascension Christ brings into the personhood of God a full understanding of human experience as gained from the inside as it were. It is part of the conception of the Incarnation that Christ the Son of man as well as the Son of God experienced all the dimensions of human experience as we experience them. He experienced the temptations which human beings are prey to in the wilderness; he experienced betrayal; he experienced a sense of uncertainty and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane; he experienced a sense of abandonment and forsakenness upon the cross – My God My God Why hast thou forsaken me. These experiences are also now part of God's own consciousness through the ascension. This wasn't some kind of elaborate charade which Jesus was going through when he knew that it would be alright on the night. The plain understanding of both the Garden of Gethsemane and the cry of dereliction and abandonment from the cross was that he did not know that his suffering and death would be vindicated. He went to his death finally in faith and in so doing he shared with us exactly the situation which we are in. All that we can do is to die in faith we cannot have more assurance than that. But Jesus' experience of human suffering means that God does not observe our experience as we might observe the suffering of an animal. Human experience is known from the inside. This is a point well made by the Cambridge theologian Professor Donald Mackinnon when he says that:

The Ascension is the complement of the Incarnation; it is the manhood that is assumed into the heavens.....the assumption of redeemed humanity into the life of God.” But redemption doesn't mean reversal. It doesn't mean that Jesus' human suffering is now displaced in the life of God. After all Christ appeared to his followers still bearing his

wounds. His suffering and the suffering of humanity is ever present. What this means for us is that there are no experiences which we can have which are in a sense outside of God's own experience of them from the inside. However uncertain, isolated, alone, forsaken we may feel, God in Christ has been through those same experiences and knows them from the inside. This is what Jesus brings to the personhood of God in the Ascension.

My third point is this. Ascension is a point of transition between the conclusion of the earthly life of Jesus where his disciples knew him in the flesh and the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This leads to a reorientation of discipleship away from Christ's physical presence to His spirit as experienced at Pentecost. There was an intimation of this at the earliest point after the resurrection when in that famous story of Christ meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden when he says do not touch me because I have not yet ascended to my Father - or as it is often put in Latin *Noli me tangere*. The verb to touch in this account has led to a lot of what seems to me to be pointless speculation about what it was about the nature of Christ's body which made it either not possible or inappropriate for Mary to touch it particularly since later in the same chapter Thomas the apostle is encouraged to put his fingers into Christ's wounds to cure his unbelief. However, however the Greek verb "απτο" the one used by St John just as naturally can be translated as cling to, fasten onto or hang on to me. Do not cling on to me as a physical presence or as St Paul says in 11 Corinthians Chapter 5 Verse 16 "though we have known Christ after the flesh (kata sarka) yet now henceforth we know him know more." There has to be a change in our sense of what discipleship demands from an attachment to the figure of Jesus in the days of his flesh to a life infused by his spirit in the world

where we find ourselves. This is borne out by the strangers talking to the apostles after the Ascension: “Ye men of Galilee Why stand ye gazing up into heaven ? that same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”

No longer is the Word far off but as St Paul says in Book 10 of the Epistle to the Romans: “The Word is Nigh thee even in thy mouth and in thy heart.” This is the Word that was with God and was God according to St. John.

This is of the essence of post Ascension discipleship. God is not far off but nigh; not a master, but a father; not a terrible outward power but one of whom we can say we are reason of his reason and spirit of his spirit. We know Christ now not after the flesh but in sacrament and in the life of the Christian community.

We need to take the emphasis on the Word being nigh seriously we do not need to go elsewhere to live a Christian life. It is often thought that to live a Godly life one has to be somewhere else- on the mountain top, in the wilderness or in contemplating the inner recesses of your own mind and soul but I think that while there is no doubt a place for these things we also need to learn from two great Anglican poets T.S. Eliot in Choruses from the Rock and George Herbert in his great hymn to the ordinary Teach me my God and King that in the words of Eliot:

The desert is not remote in southern tropics

The desert is not only round the corner

The desert is squeezed in the tube train next to you

The desert is in the heart of your brother.

We do not need to be anywhere else. We can live a Godly life in Winchester and if we live in the right spirit then it can become part of the holy city.

Some people will say that the life, death, resurrection of Christ and his coming again in the Holy Spirit is just a consoling illusion. Well I have to say that I don't find it particularly consoling partly because its demands on us are stringent particularly if we take seriously the sins of omission to which we confessed in the general confession earlier on and partly because I think that it is true and not because it is consoling. It is true I think because it is borne out in our own experience that it is in living for others that we come to have some sense of peace in our lives. Living for others whether in terms of family, friends, or in the wider society is not a matter of rights and obligations but rather of grace and that it is in giving and receiving the grace of the love of others that we most come to understand what we are.