

The Ascension Bridge

The Ascension is a difficult thing to think about. Belief in the Ascension has been right there from the beginnings of the Christian Church - but it is more often than not simply stated, not discussed. In the New Testament, it takes up five verses only. We don't even know when it happened. Having it forty days after Easter was never thought of until the fourth century. You imagine a great Biblical film, like the ones that Hollywood used to produce - what would Cecil B de Mille have made of the Ascension? It would have looked, stupid, naive, and certainly would have provided a very tame end for the picture. But we look on it as the triumph of Christ - the Day of His glory - we call it "his glorious ascension into heaven". How do we get away with it?

I suppose we have done what is right from a very long time ago. We know that whatever happened on that day when Jesus left this earth, it was meant to be a lesson - a picture that the disciples could understand. They didn't believe that heaven was just above our heads somewhere very soon after the time of Jesus - the three-tiered universe soon lost its grip on people's minds - you know hell beneath, earth on this level and heaven above. The great theologian Origen as far back as the third century said we have to think about it in terms not of going up in space, but going up in glory. It is a spiritual event, not a physical event. There are very few people left today who think of heaven 'up there' - but we still have to talk about it like that, or else we cannot talk at all. We know that heaven is not a place in space, but the place of the presence of God.

But if we don't talk about it in concrete terms, we are more or less silenced. What we have got to do is unravel why St Luke tells us the story, and see what it has got to do with us. It is interesting that he tells the story in the Acts of the Apostles, not in his gospel, (if any of you think you have read it in his gospel, you are right, but you need to know that it was probably added in to the text later on, by someone who knew the Acts as well.) So the historian Luke regards the Ascension as the beginning of part two of his story, not the end of part one. And perhaps that is a clue about what it means to us.

So rather than talk about the meaning of the glory of Christ shown in the Ascension, I want to look at the way in which the Ascension is a kind of bridge between the first part of the story of Jesus' life on earth, and the second part of the Story - Jesus working by the Holy Spirit through his church.

It was a bridge first of all because it enabled the disciples to change gear. They had been used to Jesus being around. They were getting used to Jesus being around after the Resurrection. But this hasn't to be a permanent state of affairs. He wanted them to do his work. He wanted them to be his Body here on earth. He wanted to go so that the Holy Spirit might come to lead them to all truth, to remind them of him, to teach them all things, to inspire them, to give them courage. But this could not happen whilst they were relying on his physical appearances. They had to learn not to be looking for him when things got difficult, but to trust that he would be with them to the end of time, even though they could not see him. How could that lesson be

got over to them? They had to see that he had gone. They thought in terms of heaven up there. They knew the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven. So to see him go like that was easy for them to accept. It was a bit theatrical perhaps, but without it they might always have been wondering if he would turn up again. It was a bridge for them from the time of physical presence to the time of spiritual presence.

And we can go on a stage further than that. Jesus appeared to them in ones and twos and twelves and whatever. He was still limited by the physical sight that they expected. The Ascension marks the end of the limitations on Jesus. We know he is with us today. We know that wherever we may be Jesus is with us always. We know it because it is what he promised. We live after the Ascension; we do not expect to see him. We know that his Ascension has freed him from all limitations, to be with us all evermore. We could go on and on. The Ascension builds a bridge for us between the body we have in this life, and what Paul calls the Resurrection Body. The people who say heaven must be awfully big, if there is to be room for us all are people who have not thought long enough about the Ascension. The Body of Jesus ceased to be restricted by space. the life of the world to come is not going to be restricted by space or anything else.

The time of the Ascension, whenever it was, was a time of tension, of waiting. The disciples had seen their Lord healing and teaching. That had impressed them deeply. They had seen him brutally murdered - that had shocked them. They had seen him rise to life again, that flattened them at first, but they came to believe the evidence of their eyes and ears. Now they had seen him taken away from them into a cloud - to them a symbol of God's glory. But still - I would remind you - they did nothing. Still they clung to each other. Still they kept quiet. The Christian gospel was not yet let loose on the world. They were still waiting. With Christ present they had done little. With him taken from them they did nothing. They were waiting for the promise that Jesus had made so often, and which we hear in the gospel today. "When the Advocate - the Comforter - comes whom I will send to you from the Father." Without the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. They could do nothing. The world was to be challenged with the message of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. The age of Jesus' Mission was over - the Age of the Mission of the Spirit was just round the corner. The Ascension was the bridge that led from one to the other.

So in a small way it is a bridge in our church calendar. We have celebrated Easter for five weeks. Next week we move on to celebrate Pentecost, Whitsun - the beginning of the mission of the Spirit through the church. As we worship our ascended Lord let us remind ourselves of why it was he had to go - how we are now all recipients of the Holy Spirit because he went to the Father. Let us remind ourselves that we are taking part in a service full of reminders of the ascension, and what it means. Because Jesus ascended, we have a great high priest who has passed into the heavens, and we can draw near to God in faith. We come to share in a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet. We have died with Christ, been raised with Christ; now we are glorified with Christ. We share the rejoicing of his triumph. So often we forget the Ascension. Let me finish my quoting to you some words of St Augustine.

For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing...and his Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and his most most Holy Resurrection would have been useless.

Add to that, that without the Ascension, the Holy Spirit would not have come, and we see how important this bridge is - the bridge that links the Age when Jesus walked this earth in the Body, and the age when we asks us to be his Body and in the power of his Spirit to do his work for him.