

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1 - 11
Psalm 931
Ephesians 1:15 - 23
Luke 24:44 – 53

God put this power to work in Christ

Sitting in church with a friend who had not worshipped for a long time made me think of what we say and do here, and I realized that in worship everything we do and say is metaphorical. The church is always trying to put into words what is un-utterable. Those of us who live inside the culture of this language know this instinctively, but someone new, without years of exposure to the background, has to learn this and grapple with it.

Especially in the arena of worship the church relies heavily on the language of doxology or praise that draws heavily on the poetic imagery such as is found in the Psalms and hymns and stories from the New Testament. Words like “rock” or “river” take on multiple layers of meaning. Events from stories, such as the Exodus, are used and re-used, becoming multi-dimensional and larger than life in the process. The poetic language of the church reaches beyond reason and pragmatic explanation into wonder, awe, amazement and gratitude. And while others around us read and listen with the eye of logic, asking: “did this happen? Is this reasonable? What caused this?” We are busy praising God, whose relationship with us is beyond all explanation and description. Even the most concrete thing we have to go on, the life of Jesus, is spoken of in language born of a long tradition of imagery that is deeply symbolic, profoundly metaphorical and points beyond itself to the Other.

There is no doubt when it comes to Ascension we are dealing with something that does not sit easily in the realm of logic. We are handling texts that struggle to voice the deepest reality and are, to say the least, metaphorical. What are we trying to say here? What is the celebration of Ascension about?

At the heart of the Christian tradition is the idea that God’s authority and power is not only mediated in Jesus, it is present in him. In the letter to the Ephesians the author prays that as the church’s relationship with God deepens, they “*will receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation*”. This is not a prayer about being smart or prudent, it is about an unfolding realization of God’s intentions towards the world. The New Testament tells us: “*God was in Christ*”. This is the scandal of Christian theology: God took the risk of making divine authority and power fully vulnerable to all that is human. In other words everything God is, is expressed in a life. That may be hard to stomach but the real stumbling block is this life did not live and act in the way we expect a supreme being would do. God’s authority and power embodied amongst us did not laud it over us. It did not manipulate us or play tricks on us. It revealed itself as humble power: the power of love, and it became inextricably linked to the cross.

That is the power the letter to the Ephesians speaks about when it says, God: [1:20-21] “*put that power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places, far above all rule and power and dominion*”. If the death of Christ reveals the extent of God’s self-giving for us, the words “raised” and “seated”, borrowed from the enthronement language of the Psalms, proclaim the extent to which God in turn acknowledged his faithful suffering. That God “lifted up/raised up” the suffering Jesus and seated him in the heavenly places announces the Good News that God accepted the life and work of the suffering Jesus and exalted him by receiving him to himself.

In the Ephesians reading there is no reference to post-resurrection appearances or the Ascension as such. Instead the idea Ascension as the exaltation of Jesus functions as an added element of praise that enlarges the picture of what is meant. The author has caught a glimpse of Jesus’ exaltation, and sees what this means for us. The embrace of Jesus means the embrace of the Church, and the embrace of the Church means it is empowered by God. And the sense of praise, which ends the reading, arises not from the strength of the church, but the author’s confidence in the power of God’s embrace. At Ascension we are confessing, with the first Christians, that Jesus’ “leaving” did not remove his power. Rather it affirms the power the disciples knew in the resurrection had its origin and source in God, and that power has reached us.

In our tradition of belief we say we do not know God in “himself”. We know God by the effects of divine power at work amongst us. This is seen, not in the restoration of Israel to political power, such as the disciples asked for [Acts 1:6]. God’s rule is expressed among us in a life of self-giving love that ended in death. What is so unexpected about the power at work here is that, not only did that power raise Jesus it brought to life a transformed and empowered community of faith that stood up with him. Ascension, then, is a call to live in the power of God. It means being willing to allow God to call us to stand up in the world in the power of the Risen One.

At Presbytery last week we had a report from a minister who has been working in the Kinglake area, in the aftermath of the Bushfires. He said how the Uniting Church in Kinglake was one of the few buildings left standing in the town. He also said that the Uniting Church people ‘stood up’ in that context and responded to what had happened. For five weeks they prepared and served 400 evening meals a night to the people of the area as they struggled to scrape their lives together again. The words rang in my mind: *the Uniting Church people of Kinglake stood up*. Gospel people did Gospel things. Whether anyone else understood what it meant we can’t say, but going by what we know, it is just possible that there was an inkling of the power of God at work here. We sometimes sing the Hymn that has the line in it “Now is eternal life, if risen with Christ we stand”. There are many things a congregation can stand up for, and we stand up for a few things ourselves. But the challenge for us always is to allow the power of God to raise us up, so that Gospel people will do Gospel things, in the name of Jesus Christ.
