

Ascension
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Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1 - 11

Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15 - 23

Luke 24:44 - 53

The power of love: God put this power to work for us...

Those of you who watched the Royal Wedding may have noticed that the bride entered Westminster Abbey as Kate Middleton and exited as the Duchess of Cambridge. A Welsh working-class woman ascended to royal status, not by the weight of wealth or preferred position or the force of arms - but through the power of love. The remarkable thing is while she has a new status and sits in a far more powerful place, the Duchess of Cambridge is still Kate Middleton: a Welsh working class woman.

When we come to the Ascension, the church struggles to voice a reality that reaches beyond explanatory categories. Because the "he is seated at the right hand of the Father" is spatial language, the whereabouts of Jesus Christ is thought of spatially.

Pictorial accounts of the ascension also appear as spatial. What most artists make clear, like the one who drew the graphic on today's Order of Service, is that the Jesus who was raised to sit at God's right hand carries with him the scars of his life and death amongst us. It is none other than the Crucified Jesus who is lifted up to share all things with God. And this took place because of love: Jesus' love for the Father, and the Father's love for Jesus and the world.

What we are dealing with is this: the Resurrection explains the Cross and the Ascension is a comment on the Resurrection. The three things are not separate moments, but belong together as three facets of meaning of the one thing. The earlier writings of the New Testament do not treat Resurrection and Ascension as separate events. It was not until the 4th Century that Ascension began to be celebrated separately, according to Luke's chronology in Acts, as we are doing today. Whereas in Ephesians Christ is raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand as one action, and what this means is told in very broad terms.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness that fills all in all.
[Eph 1:20-23]

This is a cosmic hymn of praise, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus as him being lifted up to share everything with God. Although the language is spatial [the right hand of God is in the heavenly places, far above all things] the meaning is connected with status. God's power – God's inscrutable energy - was at work in the Resurrection, and as a consequence Jesus has been fully united with God.

The infant church, gathered together before Pentecost, was not without knowledge of the elusive presence of the power of God. Its memory extended to the reputation of God's hand at work in the holy struggle against Pharaoh, as in the Exodus. The infant church knew God's power as present but always out of reach, as in Moses and Elijah's encounters on the mountains and in the desert. And it knew that God's power as steadfast love that responded to the cries of those who were no people, enslaved in Egypt and lost in Babylonian Exile.

Knowledge of God's power expressed in the Resurrection was not the result of the disciples' faith. It happened the other way round. The news that God brought Jesus through death to an unprecedented form of new life was a gift from God that created the disciple's faith. It revealed that the creative Word of God, at work since the beginning of Creation, had become incarnate in a vulnerable human being. In life and death of Jesus of Nazareth God, the Creator of the world, came forth to engage in the costly struggle of faith and expressed the Unfathomable Being that is God as the power of faithful, suffering love. This knowledge came to us from the generosity of God who took a broken, despised man on a cross to signal that in his life and death the ultimate hope for the world has been made clear.

This knowledge dramatically affected the life of the fearful, waiting infant church. A community that had no power of its own, and had no reason to congratulate itself on its position in the world was gifted with a spirit of wisdom and revelation that enabled it to see the hand of God at work in the world, and to know that this renewing power was put to work not just for them but for the whole cosmos.

It is this knowledge, which is Spirit driven, that empowers the Church and enables it to call on resources of energy, courage and imagination completely out of proportion to its actual strength, setting it free to continue following Jesus in his way of suffering love.

This knowledge also give hope to the church. The declaration that he has "all things under his feet" means there is no equal to him in all of reality. And because he has triumphed, we also shall triumph – not in the worldly sense but in the power of his suffering love.

The paradox is that the life of the church takes its rise from a symbol of rejection and death – but that is the inner secret of it's life. The Holy Spirit has taught the church to look for the triumph of God in the least likely place.

The song writer, Sydney Carter, most well known most for "Lord of the Dance" understood paradox very well. A song of his that is less well known "I Come As A Beggar", spells out the what it means to grasp how God is present to us.

*I come like a beggar, with a gift in my hand.
I come like a prisoner to bring you a key.
By the hungry I will feed you,
By the poor I'll make you rich.
By the broken I will mend you.
Tell me, which one is which? [Green Print for Song, p 88-9, 1974]*

By the broken I will mend you is the line that spoke to me especially. With God, it is through the broken things that we are “fixed” – put right. The journey of faith is one of trusting not in the sufficiency of our own resources or knowledge, but in allowing ourselves to be broken - facing our own weakness - trusting the sufficiency of God who has raised the Crucified One to be the head of the Body of Christ, the church. That God takes the broken things to put things right, is a deep clue to the meaning of life.

In these days, when the forces against God seem so great, Ascension calls the church to remember that power God put to work for us did not come from a marriage of the Church to worldly power. The power God put to work for us, which will ultimately bring life to the whole of creation, is the power of suffering love. This is the true power of life. This is the style of power the Church is called to exercise. And in the strength of this power we are called to live.
