

Easter 7  
16/5/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 1:1-11  
Psalm 93  
Luke 24:44-53

Ascended, for us II

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*In a sentence*

*The Ascension of Jesus is a sign that Jesus continues his ministry for us, now in the very heart of God.*

Most of you are old enough to recognise the phrase, ‘Beam me up, Scottie’, and many have likely made a connection between the biblical account of the Ascension of Jesus and the collective memory of the call of *Star Trek*’s Captain James Kirk from some alien planet up to his chief engineer Montgomery Scott in the orbiting Enterprise (‘collective memory’ because Kirk never actually said it quite like that).

Yet, it isn’t easy to make sense of where Jesus *goes* as he disappears into the clouds. Luke, of course, would answer, ‘heaven’, but we’ve long since abandoned the thought that heaven is up (I hope). For Luke, ‘up’ is a place; for us, it is only a *direction*. It would be easier for us today to hear that Jesus, after he finished talking to the disciples, simply ‘vanished’ from their sight (cf. Luke 24.31) in the way that Captain Kirk did, and to be *told* that he was now in heaven rather than to *see* him on his way there. Luke’s rather stark image of a body rising into the heavens is no doubt intended to help his first readers with the question of where the body of Jesus went, but it doesn’t much help us.

The Ascension *as an event* is not a dominant feature in the New Testament. It is a little like the Christmas stories, told quickly and without later references back to them in the rest of the New Testament. These are things which ‘must’ have happened and so are noted with an account or two, but otherwise not particularly important. *That* Jesus was born is essential; *how* it happened doesn’t matter. The gospel would still be the gospel without Christmas. So also for the Ascension: it matters *that* Jesus is in some way ‘elevated’ to ‘God’s right hand’; *how* that happened, or what it might have looked like, or even precisely when it occurred, is somewhat secondary.

This is to say that the doctrine that Jesus ‘sits at God’s right hand’ – another startlingly realistic image – can be held without Luke’s gracefully levitating Lord. We can believe that Jesus ‘sits at God’s right hand’ without believing that God has hands; so also can we believe that Jesus is ‘with’ God without visualising it in Luke’s terms. This conviction must take a specific form for its substance to be communicated, but the substance can remain much the same even if the form is changed. Luke’s image, implying as it does a view of Jesus’ feet dangling overhead, is simply the particular form in which the substance of Jesus’ relationship to God is expressed.

Of course, most weeks, we recite a creed which refers to the Ascension, and so we are put in a position of saying something the *form* of which – by itself – is difficult to defend. I hope that the distinction we’ve drawn between the form and the substance helps, so that we might be able to say that line – and every other line in the Creed – as a kind of code within which is carried the deeper confession.

But let's note two other things about the credal statement, first to embrace it and then to qualify it somewhat. As the story of God in Christ unfolds in the Creed, we hear that Jesus *was* conceived, *was* born, *did* suffer, *did* die, *was* buried, *did* descend, and *did* rise. Then, shifting from the past tense to the present, we hear that Jesus now '*is* seated' at the right hand of the Father. This is a continuing situation: Jesus *is* with God.

Note then how this relates to the doctrine of the Incarnation. To say that Jesus is God incarnate is to say that God comes into human being in the person of Jesus. Whether or not we believe it, this is the point of the doctrine. To say that Jesus 'ascends' to God is to say the complementary opposite: that human being comes into divine being. Where is God? In Jesus, among us. Where are we? In Jesus, in God. The Incarnation sees us as God's context; the Ascension sees God as our context.

We see, then, that the Ascension doesn't really 'add' anything to the Incarnation, and that the work of the Incarnation would not be incomplete without the Ascension. What we said about Jesus on Easter Day, we can also say about the Creed: it has no 'parts', but is rather a multitude of refracting surfaces through which, darkly, we see *one* thing.

Jesus is not, then, merely 'elevated' in the Ascension, or rewarded. Luke's account affirms that the human Jesus who died a sinner's death, discounted and discarded – *this one* is at the heart of God and continues there.

Ours is a time, then, marked by God's embrace of God-forsakenness. In metaphorical language drawn from the royal court, one who died the death of sinners now 'sits at God's right hand'. Seated there, Jesus becomes, as it were, *a reminder* to God of his love for the world, the presence of the broken, godless world in Jesus himself, standing, praying in the heart of God. This 'reminder' is the purpose of Jesus' prayer, which precedes and embraces our own. To place Jesus there is to place ourselves there.

To God, Jesus stands as the sign of broken creation; to the world, Jesus stands as the sign of God's embrace of that broken creation: *here* God is, and remains.

This is the gospel: in all things, God with us, us with God. In every effort, the freedom to succeed or to fail. In every joy and sorrow, God filling and extending. As we are, we are found at the heart of God, our lives hidden with Christ in God – loved *as we are*, and in that love receiving the freedom of God's children.

The gospel is that Jesus has gone before us in all things, and has already brought us into the heart of God. That being the case, fear has no place among us, nor envy or pride, nor greed or hatred. Such things have to do with incompleteness, with not yet being free. In such attitudes and behaviour, we act to secure what is already given us in Jesus. For the incarnate and ascended Jesus is himself complete and, by the grace of God, is our own completeness in God.

If Jesus is with God and prays for us, all things are already ours.

And we are released to do and to be as Jesus was: children of God, working and speaking and thinking in the God who gives us all things and frees us for a fullness of life, in love.

Let us, then, live out of that freedom.

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*Re-worked from a sermon previously preached at MtE (2014)*