

## **He ascended into heaven**

*Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2009 (Sunday after Ascension)*

Text: Luke 24:51-53, Acts 1:1-11

Last Thursday was Ascension Day – 40 days after Easter. Ascension used to be a major festival in the Church's liturgical calendar. Relics of its historical importance still survive all over Europe. For example, if you go to Bruges in Belgium on Ascension Day, you will see a big procession through the town that has taken place every year since 1291. In Cambridge University, Ascension Day is still one of the eight annual 'scarlet days', on which everyone holding doctoral degrees from the University appearing in public must wear their full festal gowns and hoods to mark the solemnity of the occasion.

But such processions and gowns are just what I said they were, relics. Nowadays, Ascension all too easily slips by without anybody taking any notice (unless, of course, you are a member of our Choir; they are usually well up on such things!). Of the four major Gospel feasts in our liturgical calendar, Christmas, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, it is Ascension that is the Cinderella feast. It does not have the benefit of being always on a Sunday, like Easter and Pentecost. In fact, the laws of arithmetic dictate that 40 days after Easter is always a Thursday! Neither does Ascension have the drawing power of Christmas, which coincides with mid-Winter, when the whole of Northern Europe is looking for a bit of cheering up.

But these accidents of calendar apart, there is another reason why Ascension is always likely to come last in the 'league table of feasts'. Each of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost is about the *appearance* of something new – the Son of God *became* a baby, the crucified Jesus *rose* from the dead, and the Holy Spirit was *given* in a fan fair of flames and rushing wind. The trouble with Ascension is that it is about a *disappearance* – 'as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.' (Acts 1:9) It is hard to be enthusiastic about a disappearing act!

There is yet one more difficulty with Ascension, what I call the 'Cheshire cat effect'. You will remember the Cheshire cat that kept vanishing and reappearing in *Alice in Wonderland*. Not unnaturally, Alice complained:

'I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!' 'All right,' said the cat, and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

I suspect it is something like the disappearing Cheshire cat that many of us have in mind whenever we hear that passage in Acts being read to us: 'a cloud took him out of their sight'. Many medieval paintings of the Ascension certainly have a 'Cheshire cat' feel, showing a pair of feet with nail marks sticking out of a cloud. Like it or not, Luke's very 'realistic' description of the ascension makes it rather challenging for the modern mind. *We* know perfectly well what lies above the clouds – every time we go into an aeroplane, we go there. So, a festival celebrating the 'Cheshire cat Jesus'

disappearing above the clouds seems at best irrelevant, and at worst downright embarrassing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian, so much so that its happening in the middle of a working week may well come a relief – we can quietly forget about it with a minimum of fuss.

And yet, and yet, we shouldn't let go of Ascension quite so easily without first asking ourselves whether anything is lost by doing so. After all, Luke thought it important enough to relate twice – at the end of his Gospel, and at the beginning of Acts. At the end of Luke's Gospel, we read:

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy ... (24:50-53)

Notice that, according to Luke, the Ascension brought about the first *worship* of Jesus. It also brought *great joy* to the disciples. The last time Luke talked of 'great joy' was back in Chapter 2. The angel said to the shepherds, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people ...' (2:10) It was the Ascension that first released this 'great joy'.

If the Ascension closed the story of Jesus, it also opened the story of the church. Significantly, the story of the Church was Luke's own story – remember that Luke did not know Jesus in the flesh. In other words, Luke is telling us that the Ascension is the pivot about which the past (Jesus' earthly life) turns into the present (the experience of discipleship).

But why is the Ascension so important for Luke? To answer this question, we need to look closely at Luke's two accounts of the Ascension. They are very short – all together we are talking about at most half a dozen verses. But one word is used five times. And it is the use of this word that distinguishes Luke's account from the Cheshire cat. The word is 'heaven':

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into *heaven*.

While [the disciples] were gazing towards *heaven* ... [the two angels] said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward *heaven*? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into *heaven*, will come in the same way as you saw him go into *heaven*.'

You see, the Cheshire cat just disappeared – Lewis Carroll did not tell us where to, because for his story, it was the disappearance *per se* that was important. For Luke, however, it was not the disappearance as such that was important. It was *where* Jesus disappeared, or ascended, to that was upper most in his mind – Jesus ascended *into heaven*.

Indeed, you can say that according to Luke, the Ascension is fundamentally about heaven. In fact, I suggest that if we are faintly embarrassed talking about the Ascension, it is probably because deep down, we are also faintly embarrassed about

heaven-talk. Heaven is, of course, a favourite subject with cartoonists poking fun at religion. Significantly, it is typically depicted as a place in or above the clouds – there's your link to the Ascension. Here, above the clouds, chaps (yes, it is usually chaps) dressed in white robes spend all day playing harps or trumpets. Supposedly, that is our eternal hope and reward. George Bernard Shaw put his finger on the problem: this heaven is (he said) 'so inane, so boring and so dull that most of us would rather spend a day at the seaside than all eternity in it.' With a heaven like that, who need Richard Dawkins to give up religion!

But that is not the heaven of the New Testament. 'Heaven' in the New Testament is a realm of reality, as real, if not more real, than the realm of tables and chairs. In this realm of reality with a capital 'R', God is present in God's full glory. Heaven is the realm of 'pure God-ness'. Many Old Testament stories emphasize just how *separate* this realm is from us humans and the universe we live in. The awesome experience of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai is the classic story making this point.

The miracle of Christmas is that Jesus brought 'the realm of pure God-ness', brought heaven, to our world, albeit it incognito – 'veiled in flesh the godhead see', and 'pleased as man with man to dwell'. Now, the miracle of the Ascension is that the risen Jesus *took our realm into the realm of pure God-ness* – he 'ascended into heaven' as the God-man. That is what Luke is trying to say with his rather realistic description. He knew as well as we do, without the need for aeroplanes, that Jesus didn't ascend to hover somewhere just beyond the clouds. Instead, his language is supposed to tell us that somehow, it is the *incarnate* Jesus who returned to the heavenly realms. Luke has already told us that Jesus resurrected *bodily*. Now he tells us that the Jesus who ascended also did so *bodily* – he did *not* shed his full humanity when he returned to his Father. Quite to the contrary, he lifted a glorified humanity into the heavenly realms. To reinvent the famous carol, '*unveiled* in flesh the godhead rose', so that now in heaven, we see Jesus 'pleased as man with God to dwell'.

In other words, when the Son of God went home, he took something new with him, our humanity. Now we can know for sure that being human, being flesh and blood, being embodied, is not an obstacle to knowing God, because embodied humanity has found a permanent home in the godhead. This is so mind-blowingly amazing that our brothers and sisters in the Greek Orthodox Church talk about it as the 'deification of humanity' – make gods of humans. In other words, Adam and Eve's ambition to 'become like god' – that's how the serpent tempted Eve (see Genesis 3:4) – their ambition is, after all, going to be fulfilled, not through disobedience, but through the obedience of the man Jesus. It would have been blasphemy to talk this way if it were not true, but it is. And we know it is true because of the Ascension.

The Ascension therefore constitutes our certain future hope – the God-man Jesus has gone before us to prepare a place for humanity in the heart, and in the heartland, of the Father, in the heavenly realms. But that is the future. In the mean time, the Ascension also has consequences for the present, because it opens up a permanent link between 'heaven and earth', if you will. Luke tells us that this link is the Holy Spirit. We have already seen how the Old Testament emphasized the separateness of heaven and earth. Luke wrote 'volume 2' of his book, the Acts of the Apostles, to convince us that the trail between heaven and earth blazed by Jesus is now permanently kept open by the Holy Spirit indwelling the Church.

But I mustn't preach a Pentecost sermon a week early! Suffice it to say that the Acts of the Apostles is, as someone once said, really the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'. Since the Holy Spirit is still acting today, the Ascension has practical consequences for us. We don't have time to look at these consequences in detail today. But it is useful to know that the New Testament actually has a treatise on precisely this subject – the practical consequences of the Ascension to daily Christian living. It is called Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I have never realised until I started preparing this sermon that Ephesians is in fact an extended meditation on the Ascension. After a sustained prayer of praise to the Ascended Christ at the end of Chapter 1 (vv. 20-23), Paul tells us why the Ascension should fundamentally change the way we act: because it should fundamentally change the way we think about who we are: we, men and women who follow Jesus, are now, not in the future, but now already 'seated with [Jesus] in the heavenly places' (Eph. 2:6). If you like, in our baptism, we share not only Jesus' death and resurrection, but his Ascension! The whole of the practical teaching in the rest of Ephesians flows from this amazing fact. Later on (Eph. 5:18), Paul gives a good one-line summary of this practical teaching: 'Be filled with the Spirit,' the Spirit who was released into the world by the Ascension.

So there you have it. I think last Thursday, Ascension Day, is rightly a 'scarlet day' for the Church. It is the public proclamation that, amazingly, flesh-and-blood somehow has found a permanent place in the realm of pure-Godness. If that is not 'good news', I don't know what is!

Let us pray in the words of the Collect for Ascension Day in the Scottish Prayer Book:

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. *Amen.*