

# The Heart: Throne for the King of Kings

a sermon preached on

## Ascension Day

Thursday 21 May 2009

at

## St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by the Venerable Craufurd Murray

Lection: Acts 1:1-11, Ephesians 1:15-23, Luke 24:44-53

Recently, this passage from the novel, 'Zorba the Greek', caught my attention: "One day when I was a child, an old man...placed his hand on my head as though he were giving me a blessing. 'Alexis', he said, 'I'm going to tell you a secret. You're too small to understand now, but you'll understand when you are bigger. Listen, little one, neither the seven stories of heaven nor the seven stories of earth are enough to contain God, but a person's heart can contain God. So be very careful, Alexis, and my blessing be with you, never to wound another person's heart'."

Today we celebrate the beginning of the shortest season in the Christian calendar – that of The Ascension. And, for many people, this is a difficult season to comprehend. I recall once turning to a book from a very reputable source, dealing with the key festivals of the Church, only to discover that the editors had chosen to omit any reference at all to The Ascension! But for years I have carried with me the memory of something William Barclay said: "There is no incident in the life of Jesus at one and the same time so beset with difficulties and so essential as the Ascension."

Often art provides us with useful points of entry into concepts and realities. However it seems to me – even with this magnificent work of art in front of us this evening – that artists have not by and large been particularly helpful in presenting the Ascension. They have found it easier to deal with a literal interpretation of Jesus being "carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51). So we find paintings of Jesus hovering above the ground, with the disciples gazing up at him in artificially choreographed attitudes of adoration. Typical of such portrayals is the beautifully executed sculpture by Luca della Robbia above the cathedral's sacristy doors in Florence. I would add that the imagery with which the Ascension is surrounded in the New Testament has been absorbed unquestioningly by many hymn writers and has continued to lock us into ancient concepts of the universe, reinforcing the impression that Jesus was heading for the skies!

On a number of occasions in Europe I have visited chapels dedicated to the Ascension, only to be met by two plaster feet projecting down from the ceiling – as if Jesus had just done a vertical take-off! The first time I came across such a feature I thought someone was playing a practical joke, until I realised it was a serious attempt to give a visual representation of the event. And then I wanted to laugh.

To visualize the Ascension as a literal elevation from the earth distracts our attention from the truth we need to grasp. To ascend does not necessarily imply any kind of physical movement. Rather, in this instance, it is about advancement – about moving to a higher level. Or, more specifically, about rising to life in the heavenly realms.

Forty days have passed since the Resurrection – 40 days, as with our Lord's time in the wilderness, is simply an expression for a lengthy period of time which creates an opportunity for new spiritual understanding. And that was certainly what the disciples experienced. They had now come to the realisation that Jesus was a necessary part of the true idea of God. But it also faced them with a paradox: Only by leaving them could Jesus be with them for ever. And this meant that the Ascension marked the beginning of a new kind of fellowship with Jesus – the kind that all believers down the centuries have come to know.

Until that day, his first disciples had become accustomed to having Jesus around them all the time, meeting with them and teaching them. But in order for the Gospel “to be proclaimed...to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47), the disciples needed to be able to carry the presence of Jesus with them wherever they were. For this reason, the Ascension has been rightly called, ‘a point of transition’ (Denney).

**Ascensiontide is when we celebrate that the presence of Jesus is always available to be experienced by those who have faith.** It is a celebration of the truth of Jesus’ words, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

When I was younger, I was puzzled by the thought of Jesus going from his disciples at the Ascension. It seemed to leave an impression that he was now removed from us – that he had gone far away to some remote heavenly place. And this sense of apartness was ‘heightened’ (!) by talk of Jesus returning to his throne, and being crowned as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and becoming the ruler and judge of all. But the Ascension, I came to realise, is in fact the opposite of this! - It has nothing to do with Jesus being distanced from us. **At its heart, the Ascension speaks only of PRESENCE.**

The Ascension is a festival to mark the continued and continual presence of Jesus. We have to grasp the profound truth expressed by words of Sadhu Sundar Singh: “The heart is the throne for the King of kings. The capital of Heaven is the heart where that King reigns.”

This thought echoes words of St Augustine who – in the fourth chapter of his ‘Confessions’ – says, “He withdrew from our eyes that we might return to our own heart to find him.” That is to say, the only place Jesus longs to be enthroned is in the heart of every person.

In one of the great prayers of Jesus, recorded in St John’s Gospel (17:23), Jesus prays to Abba, Father, that “I (may be) in them and you in me”. - He is praying that his spiritual home may be in no other place than the human heart. And so those words from ‘Zorba the Greek’ resonate with enormous insight and wisdom – and contain a vital message about the Ascension: “I’m going to tell you a secret...a person’s heart can contain God.”

Although I spoke unflatteringly about artistic interpretations, there was one sculpture I came across that appealed to me immensely. It was just a few years ago (Jan. 1995) while on Study Leave. I had arranged to visit a small medieval town in northern Burgundy, in France. The centre-piece was a 900-year-old church with some amazing stone carvings. One of them showed Jesus sitting on a throne, blessing all those around him. The sculptor appeared to have made his outstretched hands disproportionately large in order to emphasize this action. And from his hands there flowed out what seemed like fine ribbons etched in the stone, which ran towards the head of each person. It was as if Jesus was extending his life to all those gathered around him.

Now, as with all works of art, regardless of what the artist may have intended or what the experts say, the final interpretation of the meaning of this sculpture rests with the individual who looks on it. And I took from it that Jesus does not sit on some distant heavenly throne, aloof and separated from our humanity. It reveals that he constantly wants to be in touch with us. – The life that flows out from him, like those etched ribbons in the stone, is always there for us to grasp **so that we can live our lives at a higher level.**

And so the artist has tapped into the central meaning of the Ascension. We are given, as it were, a secret about the very being of God: Jesus is not an untouchable, inaccessible Lord. He is reaching out to us all the time, making it possible – as the Ascension Day Collect puts it – for us “in heart and mind (to) ascend to where he is, and with him continually dwell”.

In the Epistle for this Festival from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, he writes: “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints” (by which he means all members of the Church). And he continues, “for this reason, I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers” (1:16).

I find this greeting deeply moving. But it also raises the question for me – Could anyone write that about this congregation? Would they write it to any of us individually?

It seems that the members of the Ephesian Church had really allowed Jesus to come close to them, and to establish his reign of love in their hearts. And, in that sense, they were an “ascended people”. This has to be our story too.

**If Jesus is enthroned in our hearts as Lord, we cannot help but be witnesses to him (cf Luke: 24:48), and – like those first disciples on the Day of Ascension – we then carry with us the most wonderful cause for joy.**