

The Ascension of Christ

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sunday after the Ascension—28 May 2017

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Acts 1.1-11, Psalm 47, Ephesians 1.15-23, Matthew 28.16-20

Winston Churchill apparently overcame his fear of public speaking by imaging that his audience were all naked! Please don't worry, I am not doing that, it would be too much of a distraction! I wonder sometimes if there is truth to be found the opposite way around. Speaking publicly does reveal much about a speaker, if they are speaking from the heart. They are metaphorically stripped bare. This I think is a way for us to encounter the Psalms.

Surely among the best known, and most controversial characters of the Old Testament is King David. We know much of his life and his escapades from the pages of scripture and it is not always good and noble and true! Rather than a mouthpiece for YHWH, David is but a man on his knees or a devotee dancing in public procession. He has captivated us because he is closer to our experience than the prophets. Much has been written about David that is apocryphal—that he danced naked in front of the Ark of the Covenant and that he was the sole author of the Book of Psalms. Neither are likely, but I would suggest that David and the other authors of the Psalter, whoever they may have been, bare their humanity in texts that are joyful, hopeful, mournful, penitential, vengeful, and spiteful. Indeed, they lay bare humanity full stop; the joys of the psalms are ours: plenty, security, peace, joy. Their fear, enmity, horror are ours too: Manchester, Jakarta, Martin Place. Just this week.

Today we celebrate the Ascension. It is a festival that has somewhat fallen away in significance over the years, there are a number of reasons for this but sometimes I think we have made rather a hash of it. Artistic representations of the Ascension have left us amused and bemused. It has been viewed as Jesus' grand farewell, some sort of curtain call, the encore after the resurrection. Stained glass windows and roof bosses depicting feet disappearing into clouds, whilst a group of confused folk look on, at least give us something of the earthiness of what is going on, particularly if those feet still bear the wounds of the cross. But this iconography is not always helpful in our scientific world. I am not really fond of the hymn 'Abide with me', particularly that line: "Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies." I can't help but think of rockets or people being blasted out of canons. Responding to this, one cosmologist rather smugly said that even if Jesus ascended at the speed of light he would still today be in our universe! But this is of course to miss the point.

It could be argued that this is the most important festival in the Christian calendar. Because it is the consummation of everything that has gone before. The annunciation, the nativity, the epiphany, the life, death and resurrection are all given meaning by the feast we celebrate today, and rather than being some otherworldly thing it is all about humanity. The Orthodox call this *theosis*—it is the pinnacle of human life, achievable only through the synergy between humanity and God and it is brought to perfection in Jesus' ascension. His, our, humanity, is consumed, incorporated, taken into the Godhead and we are called to follow: St Irenaeus at the end of the second century wrote: "God passed into man so that man might pass over to God" and echoing him in the third century St. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, "He was incarnate that we might be made God."

Every day at morning and evening, the church throughout the world (and in O'Connor) recites the Psalms. As I said, they are sometimes difficult, awkward, unworthy even of Christian

thinking. St Augustine was rather worried by the fact that the psalms are not always fit for polite company.

Bishop Trevor during our Bible studies at this week's clergy conference told us to read the Psalms Christologically. I pondered what the Bishop might mean? Yes, Jesus did say, "my God why have you forsaken me?" But can we really hear Jesus saying, "Destroy my enemies", and "The righteous will be glad when they see the vengeance; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked" ... and all the other spite and horror in many of the Psalms? St Augustine tells us that it doesn't mean that Jesus is telling us that any and every human cry is good. It doesn't mean that Jesus endorses ideas about revenge on our enemies, dashing children against rocks or whatever. But it does mean that Jesus treats us, our feelings, our tumultuous personalities, as real. He takes us seriously when we're moving towards God and each other in love; and, amazingly, he takes us seriously when we're not—when we are moving away into destructive, spiteful thoughts or ways. He doesn't let go of us and he doesn't lose sight of us.

Jesus hears all the words we speak—words of pain and protest and rage and violence. He hears them; and what the Church is trying to say is that at the Ascension he takes them and in the presence of the God the Father shows his hands and feet and side and says, "This is the humanity I have brought home. I am the humanity brought home. It's not a pretty sight; it's not edifying and impressive and heroic, it's real: real and needy and confused", and here it is made one with God—to be healed, transfigured.

This past week has been yet another difficult one for many. The news has not been good, and as I read and looked at a pictures of the perpetrators of violent acts that rage welled up in me and it was given voice in the words of the Psalms. Of course, as we complete a reading of the Psalms we never say, "This is the word of the Lord: because it isn't, it's my word, our word, a human word.

The preacher at the Conference Eucharist posed the question: I wonder if the disciples asked Jesus after the resurrection 'Why did it have to be like this?' There is no simple answer to that question. Jesus would probably have responded with another question. As we prepared the Pascal Candle on Easter Eve we said, "By his glorious wounds may Christ the Lord guard us and keep us." That is a great truth; the ascended Jesus took with him those glorious wounds representing the rage, hatred, discrimination of his life and all those who have come after, and yes even our private thoughts, the things that well up within us; that in the heart of God there may be healing, redemption, hope and peace.

Amen.