



Ascension Day Reflection

Thursday 21 May 2020



Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in our lockdown state for forty days we have been celebrating with joyful hearts the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, his bursting from the tomb and his defeat of the power of sin and death. He appeared to his disciples many times and told them about the kingdom of God. Today we recall how he left this earth and returned to his Father, ascending into heaven to take his throne over all dominions and powers. Trusting in his reign over all creation, and submitting to his kingly yet loving rule, let us hear the story of his parting.

Living God, today is Ascension Day,
The day we remember how Jesus departed into heaven,
A day which reminds us that one day he will return in glory
We come then to reflect on what that means –
To recall that mysterious event so long ago
To look forward to that cataclysmic event sometime in the future
And to ask what this says to each of us, here and now
Open our ears
Open our minds
Open our hearts.
And so may all we see and hear and think and feel today
Give us a deeper insight into the wonder
Of all you have done for us in Christ
And a greater sense of all you have yet to do.

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Acts 1:1-11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'⁷ He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'⁹ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.¹⁰ While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.¹¹ They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards 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.'

Collect for Ascension Day

Risen Christ, you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven:
help us to seek and serve you, that we may join you at the Father's side,
where you reign with the Spirit in glory, now and for ever. Amen

How many of us would read a novel only to put it aside without reading the last page? Or how many would do a jigsaw puzzle and leave out the last piece? Unthinkable, surely? And yet there is a sense in which we as Christians can do something similar when it comes to Ascension. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, we mark the time he spent in the wilderness, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the last supper he shared with his disciples, his death and resurrection, not to mention the giving of His Holy Spirit. But Ascension all too often is the poor relation of the Christian Year, celebrated by the few rather than the many. Yet to ignore the message of this day is to content ourselves with an unfinished, incomplete Gospel, for Ascension reminds us that Jesus is greater than we can ever begin to imagine – one with God himself, before all, over all, and in all.

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Luke 24:44-53

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. ⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God

Malcolm Guite writes:

In the mystery of the Ascension we reflect on the way in which, one sense Christ 'leaves' us and is taken away into Heaven, but in another sense he is given to us and to the world in a new and more universal way. He is no longer located only in one physical space to the exclusion of all others. He is in the Heaven which is at the heart of all things now and is universally accessible to all who call upon Him. And since His humanity is taken into Heaven, our humanity belongs there too, and is in a sense already there with him." For you have died", says St. Paul, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God". In the Ascension Christ's glory is at once revealed and concealed, and so is ours.

A Sonnet for Ascension

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
As earth became a part of Heaven's story
And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we ourselves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light,
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed .

Simon Peter's reflection

Do you know what we did that day?

We worshipped him, that's what:

not God, but Jesus

acclaiming him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Nothing strange in that, you might say,

but there was,

although, funnily enough, none of us saw it at the time.

We knelt in homage,

overcome with awe and wonder –

to bow before him seeming as natural as breathing,

the only response that would do.

Yet we are talking of *Jesus*, remember –

the man born in a stable,

killed on a cross,

sealed in a tomb –

flesh and blood like you and me,

as human as any.

We'd followed him,

loved him,

served him...

but as one of *us*,

a man with whom we could share our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows,

knowing he would understand,

having been there too.

suddenly it was different,

the human divine, Divine human –

but it wasn't God who had altered, or Jesus

it was us,

our perceptions changed forever.

They were both bigger than we thought –

God nearer, Jesus greater –

too wonderful for words.

No wonder we worshipped,

no wonder we worship still,

for God had become one of us

that we might be one with him.

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An excerpt from Professor N T Wright's Pentecost sermon 2009:

“The early Christians, like their Jewish contemporaries, saw heaven and earth as the overlapping and interlocking spheres of God’s good creation, with the point being that heaven is the control room from which earth is run. To say that Jesus is now in heaven is to say three things. First, that he is present with his people everywhere, no longer confined to one space-time location within earth, but certainly not absent. Second, that he is now the managing director of this strange show called ‘earth’, though like many incoming chief executives he has quite a lot to do to sort it out and turn it around. Third, that he will one day bring heaven and earth together as one, becoming therefore personally present to us once more within God’s new creation. The Bible doesn’t say much about our going to heaven. It says a lot about heaven, and particularly heaven’s chief inhabitant, coming back to earth.”

Lord Jesus Christ, we greet you as King of Kings and Lord of Lords,

We acknowledge your greatness,

we recognise your authority,

we celebrate your exaltation,

we commit ourselves to your kingdom.

Living Lord, open our eyes to the meaning of your Ascension.

Broaden our vision, enlarge our understanding,

widen our perspectives, deepen our faith.

Equip us for all you would have us do,

and so may we live to you glory

and work for your kingdom.

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Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying. They were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. [Acts 1.12,13a,14]

Lord of life,
We do not know the face of the future,
any more than your disciples did.
Like them, we have many questions:
how to live
how to bear witness.
Like them, we thirst for the spring waters of the Spirit
to inspire us in our living
to give us a heart language in our testimony.

You have been raised in glory
that we might rise with dignity
You live in power that we might live in peace
You are present everywhere
that we might be fully present in our own lives
This we believe
This we step out on.

Christian Aid weekly worship

As we wait in silence,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we listen to your word,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we worship you in majesty,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your refreshing,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your renewing,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your equipping,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

As we long for your empowering,
make us ready for your coming Spirit.

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