

So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.

The great teacher and doctor of the Western Church, St Augustine of Hippo, emphasizes the importance of the Ascension in a way that may seem surprising or overstated:

“This is that festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, His Nativity would have come to nothing... and His Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and His most Holy Resurrection would have been useless”.¹

How can we make sense of such a bold claim? I’d like to start by considering on one hand, why the Ascension may not seem like Good News, something churchy, but not a source of joy. Then, on other hand, we might see what it is that makes it not just a theological truth, but a promise, a gift, a source of comfort and joy. Having sorted that out in 10 minutes, we might consider what it means for us to ascend with the Risen Lord.

Our Lord Jesus foresaw that his disciples would struggle to find joy in his going away. We heard in Gospel for last Sunday – expedient for them. This words not just for disciples then – he foresaw our struggles, that we would doubt that it was expedient, good for him to go away.

Christmas is easy to celebrate. Christmas is the festival of the affirmation of human life. God draws near, dwells with us, among us, shares our trials, and blesses the good things of our lives. This is a positive message and fits well with celebration.

But what do we make of the Ascension? The Lord Jesus taught that in going away in the body, He would draw near in the Spirit. Instead of being present to a small group in one time and place, He would be more completely and even more powerfully present to all people in all ages. But this truth, and the beauty of this truth, turns our perception upside down.

Consider the image on the front of your bulletins. ‘The disappearing Christ’, with his feet protruding from the clouds that receive him, originates in the Anglo-Saxon world at the end of the first millennium.

According to the picture, our Lord departs the world we see and know, to where? I think that we are inclined to imagine that he departs into a realm that is less real, less substantial, than this one, a fuzzy and ‘spiritual’ vagueness.

Perhaps one or two of your saw the ‘80s film about angels called the Wings of Desire. When, in film, we see through eyes of angels, movie becomes black and white- Angles are without feelings, and for directors of film, this means that they were without love. Imagine, in the film love was degraded to be a fickle and flimsy human feeling, cut off from the inexhaustible furnace of divine love.²

¹ Sermon 53.4 in *He Ascended into Heaven*, J G Davies, Bampton 1958, 170.

² Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Seas* – The love of God: ‘the one infinite and changeless act of being that makes all else actual, and is purely positive, sufficient in itself, and without any need of contrariety to be fully vital and creative’ ‘The cross is thus a triumph of divine *apatheia*, limitless and immutable love, taking all suffering and death upon itself without being changed, modified or defined by it, and so destroying its power and making us, by participation in Christ, ‘more than conquerors’ (Rom. 8:37).

This insipid world without colour and without love was the movie's presentation of the angelic world – I think that we may believe something like this, before we begin to think, when we see the feet going away. We imagine our Lord entering into a world without colour, without feeling, without life. If that is where the Lord of life is going, it doesn't seem like much of a destination.

When our Lord was 'received up into heaven' he passed beyond the categories of space and time. The eternity which he has entered is not empty of time, boring or flat, but rather the immediate presence and fullness of all time, past, present, and future, but limited by none. This all-encompassing fulness is part of the reason that the Ascension makes all the works of Christ's life, His Nativity, His Passion His most Holy Resurrection, to be fruitful for us. In passing into fulness of divine life, these works are not just past events but powerful and living realities which overflow with gifts and graces for us. Because of the Ascension, the Nativity is a well-spring of life and new birth, because of the Ascension, our Lord did not rise from the grave for himself, but rather shares his death-conquering life with all those who belong to him.

When the Scriptures open a door in heaven for us to see, the space of heaven is not empty or void, but exploding with images of life and vitality which human languages and symbols struggle to convey. The golden lampstands, the burning flames, the glass sea, the living creatures, the harps, the elders, the myriads of saints, thousands upon thousands (Dan. 7), the Lamb with a voice of thunder, all proclaim a realm overflowing with divine life. The Right-Hand of God is not a place as we understand place, for how could God who is Spirit, God who is unlimited and unconfined, how could God have a right hand limited by place?³ The space which Christ has entered is beyond any place, but it is not a void. The right hand of God speaks of the royal presence and sovereign rule of God who contains and embraces and all places and fills and gives life to all things. The hidden part of the iceberg, the divine life which we cannot see or grasp, is greater, fuller, and brighter than what our Lord revealed and showed during his earthly ministry.

Compared to the reality on the other side of those feet, it is this world which is pale and shadowy.

C. S. Lewis offers symbolic descriptions of the greater reality on the other side of the clouds in *The Great Divorce*, when the main character visits heaven from the other place.

'It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different; made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison. Moved by a sudden thought, I bent down and tried to pluck a daisy which was growing at my feet. The stalk wouldn't break. I tried to twist it, but it wouldn't twist. I tugged until the sweat stood out on my forehead and I had lost most of the skin off my hands. The little flower was hard, not like wood or even iron, but like diamond.'

Or, in the last of the Narnia series, *The Great Battle*,

The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked

³ John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk IV, Chap 2, 'Concerning the sitting at the right hand of the Father': 'We hold, moreover, that Christ sits in the body at the right hand of God the Father, but we do not hold that the right hand of the Father is actual place. For how could He that is uncircumscribed have a right hand limited by place? Right hands and left hands belong to what is circumscribed. But we understand the right hand of the Father to be the glory and honour of the Godhead in which the Son of God, who existed as God before the ages, and is of like essence to the Father, and in the end became flesh, has a seat in the body, His flesh sharing in the glory. For He along with His flesh is adored with one adoration by all creation.'

as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if ever you get there you will know what I mean.

....

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then he cried:

"I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!"

The reason we might find it hard to believe in the Ascension probably has less to do with questions of science and religion, and more to do with our materialistic sensibility. When we say that God is Spirit, we do not hear that the Spiritual world is the solid permanent overflowing reality which enlivens everything else, but we hear that the spiritual is a shadow cast by the material. The Ascension proclaims that human life with all its frailties, suffering, and impermanence is taken into the divine life. What we love and hold dear is given a permanence and preciousness which belongs to nothing less than the life of God.

The gift of the Ascension is the gift of the near presence of Jesus, in going away, He draws near. It is the gift of the Ascension, with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, that all that our Lord did for us, and all that he said, are not past and gone, but the realities in which we live and move and have our being.

Well, I have spent all my time addressing how the Ascension turns our perspective of what is real and permanent upside down. I will conclude by commenting very briefly on what it means to ascend in heart and mind with the Ascended Lord.

For Pusey, we live where we love – To ascend to heaven does not involve a crude movement from place to place. Rather, if our loves are shaped by the love of the Ascended Lord, if we desire what He desires for us, if we hope for what is most worthy of our hope; if we begin to see and know, however imperfectly, according to God's knowing in us, to see the Good and to desire it, we are already living the heavenly life. 'Standing on earth, we are in Heaven, if we love God; 'for not so as the body is uplifted, is the soul uplifted' , We live where we love.

The Ascension gives our loves, our hopes, our desires, a proper destination and goal. Every choice involves reaching out toward a principle, a desire, a hope, a goal which we are seeking. The Ascension shows us the proper end which can satisfy. It can be a searing and quite painful exercise to ask ourselves in our desires, our feelings, our principles our loves, are worthy of this destination.

I will conclude with Dr Pusey's exhortation to rejoice in the Ascension of our Lord and the taking up of human life into the divine life, and to seek the gifts and graces which belong to this day:

O choose ye then, on this Great Day, if ye have not yet chosen ... Let not this great sight fade from your eyes. Let not the tinsel of the world dazzle the eyes which were formed to 'see the King in His Beauty.' Let not the praise of men dull the ears, which were formed to hear the Blissful Words, 'well done, good and faithful servant.' Let not the cares, riches, pleasures of this world, choke the heart, which was formed to contain the love of God. Pray and all is thine. Thine is God

Himself, who teacheth thee to pray for Himself. To pray is to go forth from earth, and to live in Heaven. Learn to commend thy daily acts to God, so shall the dry every-day duties of common life be steps to Heaven>

Consider, what a gift, even 'the dry every-day duties of common life' becoming steps to Heaven, part of the ladder joining heaven and earth.

>and lift thy heart thither: commend thyself to God in moments of leisure, so shall thy rest be rest in God, and conduct thee to thine Everlasting Rest. He, thy Head, is Above; shall the heart be any more below?⁴

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.**

⁴ E. B. Pusey, concluding paragraph to the sermon for the Ascension, *Parochial Sermons*, Vol 1.