Ascension and Human Nature Islip 28 May 2017

Today we’re celebrating the Ascension. The actual day was last Thursday and at SMV we used to beat the bounds, the highlight being cherry cake in All Souls College; For St Michael’s at the North Gate the highlight is visiting the clothing department of M&S. Of the great festivals of the Church’s year it’s probably the one most awkward to make sense of; even though it has a very obvious and necessary place in the conclusion of the story about Jesus. Some narrative sense had to be made about the appearances of the resurrected Christ coming to an end, and also of the developing theological beliefs about Jesus being God, the co-creator with the Father. In a three tier universe it was logical to think of Christ at the right hand of God as co-ruler of all that is. And of course the idea of ascension into heaven wasn’t unique to Jesus; Elijah had gone up in a chariot of fire.

If you go to Jerusalem, and to the Mount of Olives, the guide will show you a ‘footprint’ in an outcrop of rock where he will say Christ launched off to heaven. They know they’re teasing you, but in terms of power it suggests a kind of rocket launch. I remember fifty years ago the great New Testament theologian, Christopher Evans, coming to Westcott House, my theological college, on Ascension Day and both shocking and delighting us by suggesting there was nothing physical about the ascension. If there were then you’d have to ask at what speed Christ ascended and as we know when a body leaves the gravitational pull it has to achieve the astonishing "escape velocity" of 6.951 miles per second.

Actually it seems to me that the Ascension is very like those resurrection stories where Jesus appeared and disappeared almost at random like at the breakfast on the Sea of Galilee after the miraculous catch of fish, or in Emmaus very soon after having broken bread at supper. These are spiritual stories with a meaning that far transcends history and that is probably why in the Acts of the Apostles the two angels who appear at the Ascension (just like the angels at the empty tomb) admonish those present:

‘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.’

And this is where we get our modern day theological angle on the event, so well expressed in the Collect for Ascension: ‘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*.’

It is moral aspiration, a desire to attain godly values, the values taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the values summed up by St Paul as the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, ‘By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.’

And we’ve seen the resilience of some of these values this week in the response of the people of Manchester to the suicide bombing in the Manchester Arena. It’s encouraging that the moral default position in the minds of so many has been care and fellow feeling, resilience and determination to stamp out evil in a drive towards a more compassionate and just society. It has nothing specifically to do with religion, but religion is able, through long experience, to ritualise, represent and express these values. But we learn in weeks like this that the values are not uniquely Christian or the property of any particular religion. The hearts and minds of people of different creeds or none has instinctively returned to a default position which I think is innate to humanity.

Last week, in a sermon at Corpus Christi College, I was talking about how Christian ethics (morals) is naturally *counter cultural* – running against the tide of popular opinion. But this week I am rather forced to change my mind. Or at least to see it in a slightly more subtle way. What did I mean really by counter cultural? I suppose the rather easy cliché that we are materialistic, pleasure seekers, selfish, having no boundaries, and allowing a massive rich/poor fault line to persist. Whereas in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7, Jesus offers a very different way forward, so radical ethics, so radical that some have described it as ‘an impossible ideal’. Typical are the injunctions, to love your enemy, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile; plus the claim that anger is morally as reprehensible as murder and lust as adultery. There’s the saying that you cannot serve God and Mammon, which summarises Jesus’ radical teaching in other parts of the Gospels about money – it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God and anyone wishing to follow Jesus’ path should sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Then there’s the fact that Jesus was exceptionally inclusive in his social outlook, literally embracing the ‘untouchable’ lepers, eating and drinking with tax collectors, drawing women into his inner circle, and citing foreigners (Samaritans in particular) as exemplars of compassion and gratitude.

That this week of moral crisis has come in the middle of an election campaign is salutary. The posturing of individual politicians and their manifest promises falls into perspective. Even they seem to see that they are on thin ice. I remember on the afternoon of 9/11 the London Diocese was holding its clergy conference in my church in Oxford and at 4 o’clock the Bishop of London was due to give his keynote address. He stood there for a moment and then had the humility to say, ‘I had prepared a lot of very clever things to say this afternoon, but now they all seem to add up to so little. Let’s spend a period in silence and then go back to our rooms.’

My book Friday’s Child, taking its title from WH Auden’s poem of the same name (In memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Having mocked some of the difficult doctrines of Christian teaching, he says,

‘Meanwhile, a silence on the cross,

As dead as we shall ever be,

Speaks of some total gain or loss,

And you and I are free

To guess from the insulted face

Just what Appearances He saves

By suffering in a public place

A death reserved for slaves.’

So the poem brings us finally to an awe-struck silence in face of the cross and an evil that cannot be understood – both Christ’s silence in death and our gasp of silence in response, as we apprehend ‘some total loss or gain’, some absolute, ultimate significance here. Amid all the ambiguity and uncertainty, the story of the Passion still provokes a faith that, as Kierkegaard said, can be neither explained nor justified.

I didn’t really mean to end up with awe struck silence this morning, although I can see that the experience of the Ascension might have provoked it. I wanted to ended up with a positive view of human nature and a genuine desire to aspire to those things which are above – i.e. a metaphor for what ultimately matters, absolute values, the love that will not let me go, the faith hope and love, the greatest of which is love.