

Ascension Day 2018

Every year, our weekly bulletin giving notice of this great festival service, adds 'followed by an ascension firework and a glass of wine!' We're not the only church to enjoy both, which do add to the sense of festive rejoicing. But what do we think the firework is really about? Or choirs singing on the top of church towers, for those who have them?

I very much doubt that anyone here thinks the rocket gets nearer to Christ in glory than we, standing on the church car-park! We now know for certain, which those in first century AD did not, that up above the clouds is not a blue dome, beyond which is the abode of eternal light in which gods or God and the angelic host dwell. Those old paintings and stained glass windows of disciples gazing up at two bare feet in the sky – the rest of the body already vanished into a solid-looking cloud ... that to us is charmingly *naïve*; it's not what we'd expect to see if we'd been there.

And do you know, I have a hunch that even our revered NT writer St Luke also had some reservations about it as pictured. Here follow a few complications, before we get to the real point.

For a start – *when* did it happen? Our reading from Acts is quite clear: forty days after the Resurrection. But the Gospel puts it on the evening of Easter day itself. And remember, both were written by the same St Luke – who was no fool but a highly skilled and careful writer. As the only one of the four evangelists to describe Jesus being 'lifted up', he clearly thinks of it as important, so how this wildly different timing? Think of him as he drew on the varied written and word-of-mouth sources he used to compile his two-volume book, in his words 'After investigating everything carefully from the first, to write an orderly account...' He found valuable things in different traditions that had arisen over the years, and felt he had to give each the benefit of a lasting home. What matters is not 'the times and periods which the Father has set', but the fact that Jesus, no longer actually *seen*, yet is very real and *with God*.

St Matthew too has a farewell scene for the risen Christ (though set in Galilee, not the Bethany outside Jerusalem of Luke's version – two traditions again); but Matthew ends with the Great Commission ('Go and make disciples of all nations ...'), then 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' And that's it. I am with you always ... Not really parted from them: not *seen* again, but still with them, with us... to the end of the age. Hard to do that justice with a visual image.

Luke, though, has a great gift for putting things in a concrete, imaginable way. He has more parables than other gospels, including some of the most vivid and memorable (the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son); and compare his version of the Beatitudes with Matthew's – not 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', but 'Blessed are the poor', and so on. Thank the Lord that we have both! Our much-loved hymn combines Luke's cloud with Matthew's promise: "Though the cloud from sight received him / when the forty days were o'er, / Shall our hearts forget his promise / 'I am with you evermore'?"

In fact Luke also makes the point that we are not just to gaze longingly up into the heavens but Jesus calls his followers *to be witnesses* – witnesses to what he taught, what he did, what he was; by what we teach, what we do, what we are; witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth.’ An impossible task for our frail mortal nature, except for his repeated promise of ‘the power from on high’, ‘power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.’ That coming we celebrate at Pentecost.

The *image* of Christ in glory, seated in fantastic splendour at the right hand of the Father in an even bigger throne – that may or may not be helpful to us; just as the image of Jesus literally floating up into the air, may or may not be helpful to us. They are *pointers* to a reality which is beyond our imagination, beyond concrete images, beyond words and concepts, even beyond sacraments – pointers to the risen Christ who is with us always, and whose witnesses we are – individually and together as the Church.

The firework, surely, is first and foremost a bit of festive fun; but also a metaphor, not in itself getting any nearer heaven, but the ‘times and periods which the Father has set’ pointing to the things metaphorically ‘above’. A playful pointer, its brief burst of light and fire and its very modest physical altitude hinting at the *light* ever-lasting, the *fire* of the Holy Spirit, and the ‘*above-ness*’ of the eternal purposes and over-arching love of God, all revealed to us – offered to us – in Jesus Christ, to whom we are the witnesses. And to whom be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.

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