

Thursday 13 May: Ascension Day

BBC R4 Broadcast, Sermon by The Very Revd June Osborne

Readings: Acts 1.4a, 6-11; Luke 24.45-53

I've twice recently heard men, who I think would call themselves atheists, express beautifully, poetically, their admiration for the life of Jesus who we celebrate on this Ascension Day. One was Matthew Parris the journalist who I heard in a 'Spectator' debate just before Easter. The other was Philip Pullman in his book 'The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ'. Both of these talented wordsmiths seem to have been genuinely impressed by the character and record of Jesus; but they both have a problem with the way that life or manifesto has been lived out in future generations. Neither of them tried to disguise their distrust of organized religion. For instance, the 'Good Man Jesus' of Philip Pullman's book says that:

"As soon as men who believe they're doing God's will get hold of power... the devil enters into them."

This approach reminds me a bit of a colleague of mine who was previously a senior officer in the British army. As we try to do our strategic thinking for Salisbury Cathedral he's fond of reminding me of the saying that 'no battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy'. It's almost as if some people believe that the ideals of Jesus can't survive exposure to human nature. There's no doubt that like the rest of human organisations the Church too often looks to its own interests, and behaves out of fear rather than justice and vision but our dilemma here is bigger than just the track record of the people who've called themselves Christians.

Today is about the things of heaven, the qualities of eternity which we encounter in Jesus because he invites us to see how God sees, and to take our share in being humanly divine.

The problem is that we increasingly think of the things of heaven as being so remote from what we know, that Christ is unrelated and unrelatable to what matters to us.

When I first knew Nick Holtam the vicar here at St. Martin-in-the Fields and the celebrant at our eucharist, we were both working in East London, in neighbouring parishes. I'm sure he'll remember how people in those parishes used to talk about things happening 'across the water'. For a long time I assumed that they were referring to things happening in France whereas they meant nothing further than Rotherhithe which you can actually see from the shoreline of Nick's old parish in the Isle of Dogs. For them there was a great sense of remoteness about South London, and that's how too many of us now speak about the things of heaven.

Some tell us that the things of heaven become remote when **they're corrupted by human power or ego or other kinds of need**. They say we should be on our guard with those who speak of eternal things because they're too often corrupted themselves. This view acknowledges that we may be able to see ultimately good, divine, things in Jesus but it's adamant that everything you and I put our hand to is only material and of this moment.

More often I meet people who believe the things of heaven are remote from their lives simply because the spiritual dimensions of eternity are so far from their experience.

I used to be the Chaplain of Birmingham Children's Hospital and sometimes sat alongside families when they'd lost children. Trying to explain to brothers or sisters what had happened

was never easy and I quite often heard the phrase ‘they’ve gone to heaven’. Of course that expressed something comforting, that the loved child was safe even if seen no longer, but it again reinforces the sense that heaven is a far distant reality.

I thought of some of those families when I read that rather unusual novel called ‘The Shack’. William Paul Young writes about how a young child is abducted whilst on a family holiday and then brutally murdered, and the rest of the book’s about how her father tries to recover his faith and peace of mind. As part of that he believes that he meets the trinity of God in three people who set up home in the very shack where his daughter was killed. It’s a vivid metaphor about how, far from being remote, God makes his home in the very place where that father is most hurt and stuck.

It’s true that you can choose to hear this evening’s Ascension readings as Jesus disappearing from the company of his friends and being removed to another realm altogether. But there’s nothing in our celebration this evening which colludes with such a sense of the remoteness of the things of heaven.

The music of Vivaldi’s ‘Gloria’, which frames our worship, itself draws us nearer to a sense of God and encourages us to believe that he does make his home with us. Like other beautiful things in our life this music asserts that the taste of eternity isn’t a specialized religious experience but is part of being human itself. Which of us, of any faith or none, does not long for the transforming of our human nature into something which we would call truthful or glorious?

Jesus’ ascension into the realms of heaven is part of God’s quest to draw each of us into Christ’s nature, that way of life so deeply attractive because it heals and offers forgiveness to us in our deepest parts. So far from being about removal and remoteness it’s about transforming our world so that all of us can live as free people, all of us know the security of belonging and who we are, it offers a sense of being valued and the ability to find meaning in suffering. Heaven isn’t a place of unattainable perfection but it becomes real when we build together things of mercy and liberty for everyone here and now. Whether it’s the mercy of caring for someone with dementia or championing the liberty of a prisoner of conscience we can become a manifestation of Christ’s peaceable kingdom in our world.

All those who tried to describe the Ascension in the New Testament were clear that Jesus was going to the right hand of God so that he might be closer to us in his risen body. Humanity, yes even corrupted and untrustworthy humanity, is capable of being glorified, of scaling the heavens and knowing God in this material world. The gift of the Spirit is precisely so that we might know Christ in us and be raised to life divine.

We may treat the things of heaven as if they were a far and unimaginable place but believe me, the risen King of the universe is as close to us as we are to ourselves. He has made his home with us.