

Thursday 25 May 2006: Ascension Day

Lord, Thou hast raised our human nature

Readings: Daniel 7. 9-14; Luke 24. 44-53

Bishop Christopher Wordsworth wrote a hymn for today that sums up nicely what the Ascension is about:

*Lord, Thou hast raised our human nature
to the clouds at God's right hand;
There we sit in heavenly places,
there with thee in glory stand.
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
man with God is on the throne.
Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension
we by faith behold our own.*

Today Jesus returns to the glory of the Father, taking our humanity with him. What that means is that our human nature and God's nature are not opposites. The Ascension reminds us that our destiny too is to become divine.

That sounds odd to western Christian ears. We are so hung up on sin and the fall that it sounds proud and presumptuous to speak of ourselves as potentially divine. We devalue the word 'human', and use phrases like 'Oh it's only human to make mistakes', as if humanity and the perfection of God were incompatible.

But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition theosis or divinisation is the normal word for salvation. Divinity is what humanity is for. It's our destiny, and we needn't be shy of saying so.

It is also a thoroughly biblical perspective. There's an important passage in John chapter 10 where Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees. They want to stone him because he has called himself God's son. And his answer is very interesting. He quotes Psalm 82 at them, where God says, 'I have called you all gods, even though you die as men'. 'Look', says Jesus, 'if God calls all people gods, even though they are mortal, why do you want to stone me for saying something that's potentially true of you as well? If only you'll let me in, you can realise your destiny too, and become children of God yourselves. That's what you're made for'.

In biblical thinking, the trouble is not that we are too human, we are not human enough. If we were fully human, as God made us to be, then by definition we'd be divine as well, just as Jesus was fully human and fully divine - Son of Man and Son of God. Because God made us in his image, it's when we are most human, most truly ourselves, that we are most truly like him.

It's a sign of the church's failure that to many people outside, Christianity doesn't seem to make you more human but less. Jesus talked about faith 'giving you life more abundantly', but it often doesn't look that way. If anything, people suspect that Christianity narrows life down, takes the fun out of it, and de-humanizes you with a lot of unnecessary hang-ups and hypocrisies.

But of course it depends what kind of Christian faith you have. When I was a College Chaplain I often despaired of the most loudly Christian students, because it was obvious that instead of assisting their personal development their faith was actually arresting it. They'd abandoned their personality and intelligence to become a sort of holy robot for repeating religious jargon. It gave

them a sort of security, but they bought it at the terrible cost of abandoning their humanity and becoming extremely boring. A mental shutter crashed down, and once the conversion was complete you might as well talk to the wall.

In the worst cases bad religion makes you literally inhuman. Dogmatic fundamentalism, whether it's Christian, Islamic or any other kind, makes people abandon their 'merely human' instincts of reason and compassion in favour of their literal interpretation of the Bible or Quran or whatever the text may be. And the results of that are invariably dehumanizing and, and sometimes literally murderous.

In the Gospels it's clear that the humanity of Jesus was rich and full and totally opposed to the religious bigotry of his own day. He was open to every kind and class of person, and he allowed others to be themselves. He didn't narrow life down; he enriched it and enhanced it. His kind of holiness didn't raise barriers, it broke them down, to the extent that because of the company he kept, he was accused of being a womaniser and a drunkard. He managed to make people feel at home who would feel completely out of place in our churches today: all the people on the margins, all the disreputable people gathered around him, because he saw past the labels and simply took them for what they were: human beings, brothers and sisters made in the image of God.

There's a lovely passage in the diary of Thomas Merton, where he describes an experience he once had of suddenly seeing the divine in people. He writes:

I was in Louisville, Kentucky, in the shopping precinct, when I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people around me, even though they were complete strangers. It felt like waking from a dream. It was as if I could see the secret beauty in their hearts, the deep self where sin and ego can't reach, the core of their reality, the person that each is in God's eyes. Of course I couldn't say it. You can't go up to people and tell them they're walking around shining like the sun. But if only they could see themselves as they truly are ... If only we could all see each other that way all the time. I suppose the problem would be that we'd fall down and worship each other.

A real Christian church is one that shares that vision and does what Jesus did: accepts us as we are, but sees the potential in each of us, and helps us grow into that divine self that we already are in God's sight. Karl Marx, of all people, once remarked that the Church ought to be the 'heart of a heartless world', a place where we can discover and accept one another as real human beings, with all our wounds and complications, and can then begin to grow together into something more.

The real Church of Christ is not an exclusive club for the religiously and morally respectable that you must qualify to enter. On the contrary, the one qualification for entry is knowing you can't qualify. The real Church is a free hospital for damaged souls, looking to be healed by love, and growing by love to become more human, not less - and in the process becoming divine.

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