

“The Ascension” a sermon based on Acts 1:1-11 and Mark 16:15-20 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 13 May 2018.

Today is one of my favourite Sundays, the Sunday after Ascension Day.

I associate the window behind me (at the front of the church) with the ascension. It was installed in 1964 and is called “Christ in glory”. Notice the raised hands. The purple robes of royalty. The crown. The crucifixion marks in the hands. Jesus looking upon us, hands outstretched, calling us together, lifting us up?

The long ending of Mark includes these words – “he was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.”

Luke in Acts includes these words – “... as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

Tom Long says the ascension is not really spatial.

Jan Lochmann notes that “he ascended into heaven” needs to be read with “and sits at the right hand of God.” (as in the Apostles’ Creed)

In other words ascension is not about place but about scope and direction and tense.

Scope

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

Christ is over all, over every aspect of life, to the ends of the earth.

In the Philippines last week there were more extra judicial killings. A funeral for another murdered priest. The Chief Justice was ousted at the initiative of the President.

It would be easy for the church there to give up. Instead it is praying, resisting, protesting, organising, despite the danger.

Because of the Jesus portrayed in the stained glass behind me.

Last week Fashion ID brought together ethical designers. It would not always have happened. For decades the cotton in our clothes was harvested by child labour in Uzbekistan.

Churches, schools, trade unions and more campaigned for years. Tear Fund New Zealand has produced an ethical guide. Gradually clothing manufacturers changed and worked to create more change.

So this year, for the first time, the International Labour Organisation was able to say – “there is no systematic use of child labour in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan and significant measures to end forced labour are being implemented.”

The ascension is about the scope of the living Christ.

Direction

In his 1958 painting, Salvador Dali gave the ascension a different look. A person being drawn into a gold shining dome. Above the dome is a woman from whom emanates white rays. Around the dome are exploding clouds.

The direction of Christ is unclear- Is he moving up or down, in or out? Dali said that he drew it after having had a dream, eight years before, about the nucleus of an atom. Christ is being drawn into this nucleus.

Notice - Christ is entering the centre of the painting, not the top of the painting.

Christ is being drawn along, horizontally, as in to an MRI machine. Dali spoke of Christ being drawn into the marrow of reality, the very fabric of the universe. Of Christ going inward rather than upward, into the centre of divine grace.

Peter Matheson has noted that for the Reformer Thomas Muntzer, ascension meant not looking up to heaven, but the mystical and often painful probing of the abyss of the heart and the work of the spirit within.

So the beautiful prayer -

O Lord, bestow on us the grace of the holy spirit so that the dew of your goodness may sprinkle the very depths of our heart and make it bring forth good fruit through Jesus.

The nucleus to which Christ journeys is our inner being, the inner abyss often mysterious to us, which shapes so much of what we do.

Bertel Thorvaldsen was an early 19th century Danish sculptor. One of his most famous works is Christus, the ascended Christ. As he shaped the sculpture he crafted a clay model. He left it in his workshop overnight. When he found it in the morning, it had sagged, leaving him with a Christ who had bent as if reaching down towards the world, into the world. He thought this was a better depiction of Christ and so he incorporated that posture into the final work.

The ascending Christ bends towards us.

Mystery

And at the same time, his empty hands are reaching out. Stretching hands, trying to grasp on to the unseen reality.

We are speaking of heaven, the mystery beyond us and beyond our making, yet encompassing us. The mystery that is wild, untamed reality, the heart of God, the abyss of God. I remain challenged by these words of the author Annie Dillard, so much addressed to me:

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT.... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

The long ending of Mark's gospel was added decades after the shorter ending. Such had been the experience of the early church that the editor wanted to add more.

So we have the story of the ascension. And we also have the threat of demons and snakes and deadly drink. The early church faced terror and threat and personal danger. At the same time the church had a sense of the presence of Christ. Presence, not remoteness.

At the centre of the Dali painting are dirty feet. Christ is not at a safe distance far above. Christ is within us in our bodily experience, in the terror and the danger and the threat.

So for the early church, Christ changes reality, and enables them to reimagine reality. The ascended Christ reaching to the ends of the earth. The ascended Christ entering into the centre of life, the mystery beyond our making or controlling.

Janet Morley's prayer for Ascension:

"O God, you withdraw from our sight
that you may be known by our love;
help us to enter the cloud
where you are hidden,
and surrender all our certainty
to the darkness of faith
in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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