



Reflection for Ascension

On Thursday of this week I hope to join in the church's observation of the Ascension of Christ to heaven. It is a feast day not in public consciousness to the extent that Christmas and Easter are. But nonetheless it is important.

Ascension Day is forty days after Easter. It is the day we remember that after his death, the risen Christ had walked with his disciples, and made himself known to them through those distinct actions of breaking bread and sharing the wine which he had blessed. The Bible accounts that he ascended to heaven; that he was received into the innermost presence of God.

I recognise that many people, including many church members, find this a difficult aspect of Christian belief. It has been the focus of both sculptors and cartoonists. In York Minster there are the soles of a pair of feet sculpted inside the roof as a reminder. In more recent times a cartoonist depicted a pair of legs dangling from the top of the frame and several disciples looking upwards towards them. The cutting caption was - "Don't go Jesus, we need more rules to run the church!"

Both these examples show some of the difficulty in getting one's head around the ascension, its meaning and relevance. But that doesn't mean we should set it aside, or ignore it, or try to paper over it. After all, it is a belief which was at the core of the infant church and shaped its faith and witness in the most dangerous of times.

One of the foremost present day Bible scholars writes - "To embrace the ascension is to heave a sigh of relief, to give up the struggle to be God (and with it the inevitable despair at our constant failure), and to enjoy our status as *creatures*: image-bearing creatures, but creatures nonetheless" (NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 114).

The heart of our faith as Christians isn't about the good things we do; it's about our relationship with Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, who has ascended into Heaven and is still very much alive in the fullest and realest sense of the word possible. That is the starting point, the foundation upon which everything else is built. This is the truth that the Ascension affirms.

The Ascension also provided a focus for the foremost church scholar in England in the 700's. He was the Venerable Bede, whose work is still making headlines in the press with the recent display in Jarrow of a copy of an illustrated Bible which his community sent to the Pope. It was Bede who divided time into BC and AD. He wrote the history of the English Language. He died during the Ascension Vigil in 735 having just completed his translation of St John's Gospel into Old English. A traditional account states that on his deathbed he dictated the prayer which has been handed down in my tradition and shaped our prayers for this very special time in the Church's yearly remembrance of the events in Christ life - risen, ascended, glorified.

Grant, we pray, Almighty God,
that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ
to have ascended into the heavens;
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
and with him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

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