

## Ascension Day Year B 2021

13.v.21

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If you have ever been to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, you can't possibly forget the ascension chapel. In the ceiling is a large cloud, out of which pokes a pair of feet, as if our Lord has been stuck as he makes his way up to the sky. If you go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you will be able to see a pair of footprints in the ground, as if Our Lord had blasted off into space from that very place! It's easy to find it all rather amusing, and comfort ourselves with the sophistication of our faith that knows that he didn't really fly off into the sky, that heaven isn't a place up there in space somewhere, and that we appreciate some deeper truth about the stories of the disciples looking up in bewilderment after their departed Lord. But the comic incongruence of these very physical and literal representations of the ascension actually tells us something important. However sophisticated one's reading of the ascension, there is, at its core, something absurd. We proclaim that a human being – physical, existing in time and space – is present in heaven. Heaven, which is outside of time and space, where time and space have no meaning outside of the mind of God, and which is no *place* at all. It seems a logical impossibility. Furthermore, we proclaim that this human being, who had a beginning in time and a human story, is the second person of the Trinity, is God himself, unchangeable and eternal. So was there a *time* in heaven before which the second person of the Trinity was free from the encumbrance of flesh? Surely not, if heaven exists outside of time? Should we imagine, with Milton, the Son volunteering for a rescue mission and then returning, enfleshed and triumphant?

A contemporary Stoic or Platonist would say, well, there you have it. The whole Christian faith is an impossibility – and a scandal. They would say that God is beyond the material and that the goal of the rational creature is to escape the material before union with God is possible. The material is inherently demeaning to the soul, the true part of us which comes from God, and is a trap from which we must escape; God himself cannot, by definition, have anything at all to do with it. One does not need to be a late-antique philosopher to believe a version of this. Hatred of the flesh is alive and well in our own day. Impossible standards of beauty cause us to hate our bodies

and mortify our flesh with dieting and to waste our money on wellness fads; the bodiliness of the homeless disgusts us as we recoil from them. I am also struck by how poorly the mental health of our students is served by a relentless focus on the life of the mind, with feelings associated with irrationality, anxiety and desire, medicalised and slated for amputation.

The Christian faith teaches us not only that the material is not bad, but that it is *holy*. We worship a risen Lord, not a departed spirit; we meet him in the physical signs in which he has chosen to be present – the blessed sacrament of the altar and the blessed sacrament of the human beings he gives us to love.

St Paul talks often about an opposition between flesh and spirit. But by flesh, he does not mean the body; and by spirit, he does not mean the disembodied. By flesh, he means the whole person in bondage to sin, and by Spirit, he means the whole person re-made in Christ. To make sense of the Gospels' stories of the ascension, it is – as so often – necessary to go to Paul. In the first letter to the Corinthians, he explains what our bodies will be like after the general resurrection:

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another...

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption:

It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power:

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.<sup>1</sup>

The resurrection body is different from the body as we experience it now. The Gospels show us that the resurrection body both is and is not like our current enfleshment. Christ, the gospels are keen to show us, eats with his friends; his body still displays the wounds of his passion. This is, in some senses, the *same* body. However, he can appear in a locked room and those wounds which once betokened only suffering are now a place of powerful encounter between Thomas and his Lord, and the place from

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 15.40, 42-44a

which the sacraments of life flow – water and blood (Jesus, in John’s gospel is always in a sense the resurrected Christ). This encounter between Christ and Thomas, so often shown in art as a penetration of Christ by Thomas, gives us a clue to one of the profound differences between our bodies now and the resurrection body. Now, our bodies separate us from one another. Yes, there are ways in which they are the means of intimacy – and we are powerfully aware in this time of Covid of the effect on our mental health of being deprived of them – but there is a point past which we cannot travel. We can be empathetic in our thoughts and tender in our touch, but there is a limit, prescribed by our bodies, to how intimately we can know one another. In this fallen world, our bodies are also the means of violence, whether the active violence of assault or the passive violence of our governments allowing millions of people in developing countries to die of diseases we have the means to cure. But the resurrection body is not hermetic in the same way – it is transparent rather than mysterious to others: “Then I shall know even as I am known”. It is the means of participation in a life which is radically shared rather than radically individual. Then there shall be no more Greek or Jew, but all shall be one in Christ Jesus.

This is the kind of life that only God experiences. The Greek Fathers used the word ‘perichoresis’ to describe the way in which the persons of the trinity penetrate one another. Now, all the language we use about the Trinity can only be approximate, can only gesture towards the reality of God. But what theologians like Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus were driving with the idea of perichoresis was that the love of God leads to an intimacy between Father, Son and Spirit deeper than anything we, bound by our individuality, our bodies, can experience. The promise of the resurrection body is that it allows us to have this same kind of experience, both with the Godhead and with one another: a radical interpersonal love where the life of one is the life of all. There are foretastes of this experience in the life of the Christian now – Christ *is* risen and he shares his risen life with us. For brief moments, we are caught up in the perichoresis of the Trinity – in the liturgy of the Church, in the Sacrament of the Altar, in the surprising, self-giving love of another person, and – just occasionally, if we are lucky – in our prayers. But these experiences, however fleeting, however much we doubt them after they have passed, are given to us as a promise of the life to come. However rare, however fatally we squander them, they are to be

absolutely depended upon as a revelation of our destiny as human beings redeemed by Christ.

The feet sticking out of the ceiling in Walsingham convey something important – that the life to come is *yet to come*. At the moment, it seems absurd – the language we have to talk about eternal life or the life of heaven is strained and inadequate, because it is the language of fallen creatures. Even the language of perichoresis is not much better than feet sticking out of the ceiling, as the gulf between what we can conceive and theologise and the reality of God is immense. But what we do have is the gift of the Spirit, the tokens of love in the teachings of Christ and the Eucharistic meal we share today. We have God's initiative in reaching out to us to draw us into his life of eternal, infinite love. The gospel narratives, the theology of the Fathers, this poor sermon, are only attempts to make sense of this experience of being loved in a way that bursts the confined of human experience and language. We should remember that the taking up of the humanity of Christ into heaven is the work of God, not the achievement of humanity. Our job is to receive the gift, be open to the love offered to us in Christ. And the only way to do that is to keep Christ's most simple command, the command he tells us he received from the Father, and for the keeping of which the Spirit is given: that we love one another, as he loves us.

Amen.