

St. Mary Magdalen

Ascension Day 2019

Ascension Day is rather a Cinderella of a Feast Day. It hardly figures in our secular calendar any more, though in strange places like Oxford you may still find little groups of people from churches and colleges and schools processing round the town to mark parish boundaries – the so called “beating the bounds”. Our own churchyard saw 2 lots of boundary beaters this morning. And when I acted as chaplain to Brasenose I had to welcome groups from the University Church and St. Michael at the Northgate as their boundaries passed through the college. This custom is very ancient in England, dating at least from the reigns of Alfred the Great and Athelstan; and it performed a really important function – marking and embedding in common understanding the parish boundaries before the days of modern surveying and maps. It also marked the time when the parish priest prayed for the actual land and its crops within the parish – hence the term “Rogation days” in the days before Ascension, from the Latin verb to ask.

Even among Christians Ascension Day tends to take a very secondary place, sandwiched between the great feasts of Easter and Pentecost. It is as if we do not know quite what to make of it theologically; while its language and imagery of ascent makes us uncomfortable. Moreover, the Ascension only appears in the writing of the author known as Luke – in the gospel which bears that name, and in the Acts of the Apostles. The longer ending of Mark’s gospel makes brief reference to it, but this was probably added in the second century. It is, moreover, a Feast of farewell: and the great joy we hear of seems strange, and in such contrast to the fear and confusion which accompany so many of the accounts of the post-Resurrection experiences.

So why should we bother? What should this observation teach us? Why should we come together to celebrate the Eucharist in thanksgiving for it? Let me offer you three possible reasons why this is anything but a minor Feast.

There is firstly its place in the writing of Luke. Although his gospel is in a sense a portrait of the life of Jesus, it is also far more than that. He is actually doing theology

– to use a more modern idiom. He is teaching about the work of God in the way he puts together the life – particularly what he decides to include in it. Luke’s great theme is the saving work of God in human history, unfolding over time and coming to fruition in the life and death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Jesus is the one whose life was laid wide open to the love of God, who offered no resistance, clung to nothing human, and was so immersed in God’s nature that he was the supreme instrument of God’s work in time. It is for this reason that Luke gives us a birth story, embedded in Jewish piety and hope, at a specific historical juncture. The theme of Jesus who is the Son of God who is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets is underlined through the gospel by the genealogy given for his earthly father, Joseph, back to Adam; in the account of Jesus’s baptism; and in the vision of the transfiguration. It is for this reason too that after describing the death and resurrection of Jesus Luke portrays him as received back into God, the Father, having completed the work of defeating sin and death. For Luke, Jesus is Lord; and his account of the ascension is an essential part of his theological message. The imagery has links with the Old Testament which would have spoken powerfully to his early hearers and readers – such as the account of Elijah being taken up in a whirlwind into heaven, or Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man in clouds of glory. The reference to a cloud receiving him from their sight would have taken those early Christians back to the cloud in the Jewish scriptures as the sign of God’s presence, as in the flight from Egypt, when the cloud overshadowed them during the day.

However, the kingdom over which Jesus is Lord, the Kingdom of God, is far more than personal salvation, the defeat of sin and death in individual lives. The Kingdom is the re-creation of all humanity. So Luke’s gospel is full of stories of this re-creation – of healings, exorcisms, and the good news of God being proclaimed to those the world of the day despised or marginalised. When John the Baptist sent word to his cousin to ask if he was really the One who was to come, the Messiah who would bring in the Kingdom, Jesus replied to John’s disciples, echoing passages in Isaiah: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” (Luke 7: 18-22) So in our celebration of the Ascension we are celebrating with Luke the Lordship of Christ, and surely reminding ourselves that we

as members of the Body of Christ now on earth have our part to play in the practical work of being citizens and servants of that Kingdom.

Celebrating the Ascension is important for a second reason – that it is the prelude to Pentecost and the letting loose of the risen life of Christ and his Spirit in the whole world. It is the gospel of John which makes most plain this connection. Jesus is portrayed as saying to Mary Magdalen in the garden when she mistook him for the gardener – touch me not, don't hold on to me now in my present form, I am not yet ascended to my Father. It is his very departure and the end of the limited number of post-Resurrection appearances which opens up the possibility of the risen Christ pouring out his life into countless numbers of his followers through the ages, This is indeed reason for the “great joy” of which we read rather strangely today.

There is yet another reason for celebration today – and which the Church from very early times recognised, grasped hold of and preached. Christ risen and ascended bears the marks of his human life and death – just as he had showed poor doubting Thomas, inviting him to touch the marks of the nails and spear. So our humanity is taken by him into God, welcomed, hallowed and glorified. This is not just the culmination of what he had been and what he had done in his earthly life as God's faithful servant and son. It is a foretaste of our own destiny – that our human-ness in all its fragility and muddle, its broken-ness, will be enfolded in God and transformed from glory to glory. As the great 2nd century Bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, put it, "[T]he Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."