

Ascension: *A Man in Heaven*

Readings: Hebrews chapter 4, verses 14-16 ; Acts chapter 1, verses 6-14

Thursday this week is Ascension Day and it will be totally ignored by everybody including most Christians. Which is a great pity. This story is full of meaning, and this morning I want to focus on one of the meanings. The story itself is not to be taken literally and Jesus is not being pictured as an astronaut being taken up into outer space. It is richly symbolic and it has a very practical application to our Christian life. I put its meaning into six words which I hope you will memorise. There is a Man in heaven. To say that Jesus ascended is to say that His human experience has been taken up into the experience of God Himself. Now let's explore the relevance of that to our life today.

In 1965 Ian Smith, Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia unilaterally declared Independence from British colonial rule and for the next 15 years a state of war existed. The British Government imposed sanctions to bring this rebel country to heel which was fair enough. I too, was opposed to UDI. But the difference was that I had to live and minister within this conflict situation and it wasn't easy. I tell you now that what used to infuriate me more than anything else was the way in which parsons and politicians would descend on us on 10-day 'fact-finding' missions. At the end of 10 days they returned home to Britain as "experts" and started pontificating on how simple the issue was and how simple was the answer. They came with an attitude which said; "I have made up my mind, don't confuse me with the facts" and it infuriated me. My complaint was that they didn't take any account of the complexities of the situation. Nor did they have to live with the outcome of what they advocated. I was exasperated because they simply didn't understand.

Many people feel the same way about God. He lives in His heaven above and beyond Planet Earth which is itself a tiny fragment of the sun. Such a God cannot be remotely interested and concerned with the details of life on earth; still less does He understand. And I have often had to counsel people in great distress and they have cried out "Nobody understands what I am going through". And they have included God in the 'nobody'. God is the great Outsider, distant, remote and incapable of understanding what is involved in being human.

Its not true. And two fundamental Christian doctrines give the lie to this assertion. Christmas and the Ascension.

One is Christmas. For when you strip away the superficial trappings of Christmas you are left with the fundamental assertion that in Christ God has come into this world as one of us. Not on a fleeting 10-day fact-finding mission but on a long-term basis. 30 years in fact. In Christ God assumed our humanity and as man, Jesus experienced the full range of what it means to be human. For starters He was tempted as we are and temptation is a basic component of all human experience. Jesus knew what it was like to experience joy and pain and suffering; hunger and happiness and homelessness, disillusionment and despair. Most of all He knew what it is like to feel abandoned, even by God. Hanging there on a Cross he cried out in total despair: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Don't say that God doesn't understand. In the humanity of Christ God has experienced all that it means to be human. In colloquial jargon God has been there, done that and got the T-shirt! The Ascension of Jesus means that there is a man in heaven. Jesus' experience of being human has been taken up into the life of God Himself; become part of God's experience too.

Or else look at it this way. Imagine someone living in Bedfordshire wanting to know to know the benefits and delights of living in Zimbabwe. You could send them a glossy brochure produced by Thomas Cook or Trailfinders. You could give them Ordinance survey maps and direct them to Google search for information. And no doubt they would be informed. But far better would be to find someone who has actually lived there — in other words send me!! I could show them things

and take them to places which are not in any travel brochure. I could take them to rock paintings in the Matopo Hills, or to a small hut on the banks of the Zambezi River where you have to catch your supper by fishing in the river. I could introduce you to ordinary African villagers carving out a simple and precarious living in the hot and hostile environment of the Zambezi Valley. You will not find these places and people in any travel brochure or on Google Search. I have been there, done that and got the T-shirt. And now, back in England I can share that experience with you.

So with Jesus. To say that He ascended is to say that He has gone back to be with God and taken with Him the experience of being human. He shares it with God and it has become part of God's experience too.

It's the difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is often cheap and you can do it at a distance. Empathy is something else. Empathy means being able to feel as they do; to experience their pain, their joy, their sorrow – and therefore to understand. The Ascension says that God is able to empathise with us because the experience of being human has been taken up into the experience of God. There is a Man in heaven!

...Which is why I love that hymn by Jean Ingelow:

"O God, O kinsman loved but not enough.
O man with eyes majestic after death;
whose feet have trod along our pathways rough,
whose lips drawn human breath.
By that one likeness which is ours and thine,
by that one nature which doth hold us kin...
I pray thee visit me."