

4 May 2008 Ascension

Daniel 7: 9-14; Luke 24: 44-53

Ascension can seem like a bit of a Cinderella of a feast day. As my son said years ago, it's not much of a feast if you don't get presents. And yet this is a feast of pure joy. Writing about the Ascension, St Augustine bursts into ecstasy:

“Our Life came down to this our earth and took away our death, slew death with the abundance of his own life: and he thundered, calling us to return to him, calling to us by what he said and what he did, calling to us by his death, life, descent and ascension to return to him. And he withdrew from our eyes, that we might return to our own heart and find him. For he went away and behold he is still here. He would not be with us long yet he did not leave us. O ye sons of men, even now when life has come down to you, will you not ascend and live?”

Jesus returns to the Father, so that I can find him in my own heart.

Now I love all the glory that goes with this feast – great hymns, wonderful music and poetry and imagery; but for a lot of people all that's going to leave them pretty cold. The ascension event is, let's face it, pretty fantastical, and you can see how artists have struggled to represent it. But the reality check on this isn't how the ascension happened. One of the early Russian cosmonauts as he orbited the moon triumphantly reported back that he'd been into outer space and God wasn't there, which is something of a misunderstanding of where God is. And Ascension is just as easily misunderstood. It's the meaning that matters.

But in fact our hymns do capture the meaning. See he lifts his hands above; See he shows the prints of love. There's the truth, there's the meaning. Your suffering and mine is taken right into the heart of God. It's not over on Good Friday. It isn't “job done”, the end of a sort of divine excursion into the human realm, like Marie Antoinette playing at being a shepherdess in a toy farm. This isn't royalty pretending to slum it for a kind of divine gap year.

The work of love, the work of the Cross, goes on. So what is happening for you now, whatever tough stuff you're handling, it matters. It's borne on Christ's heart, just as we bear on our hearts the sufferings of our children – the kind of love where you know you'd take their sufferings on yourself if you could. And that's the kind of loving with which the ascended Jesus holds our pain at the heart of God. Every hair of your head counted, every tear collected in a bottle, like the psalmist tells us.

Now in the ancient world, this kind of talk would have freaked people out completely. To the philosophers Paul was addressing on the in Athens last week, this was mind-bending. To them the Divine was the great, original Idea, a kind of pure intelligence which was immutable and impassible – in other words the Divine felt nothing. Alongside of which, of course, they had their traditional gods who were at the other extreme, almost using human beings as playthings.

But the God revealed in Jesus utterly subverts both those ways of thinking. God neither stands aloof, nor does he pull our strings like some puppet-master – and what a lot he'd have to answer for if he did. Instead we have a God who is inside our pain, and in Jesus, has the wounds to show it. This is the truth Paul describes as a stumbling block to Jews and a folly to Greeks. But, Paul says, this is wisdom. Not God as an abstract Idea that feels nothing; but God with nail-marks on his hands and feet. This is a God who gets real, and, just like Augustine says, calls to us to get real too.

In the children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a toy rabbit arrives in the nursery and he asks one of the older toys, the Skin Horse, just what does it take to become real, to be more than just any toy. "What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose *you* are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled. "The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

I don't know about you, but when I need someone to be with me when things are falling apart or I've made a mess of something, or I'm just sad, then I look not for some bright shining superstar of a person who's never had a failure in his life. I look for someone who's maybe been roughed up a bit by life, someone who maybe has some wounds, someone who feels real for me.

Today we give thanks that the wounds of the ascended Jesus are what make him real, for all time and for everyone. And because he is real for me, I know that I can be real with him. Because the goal of the journey isn't to be some kind of mythical model Christian that doesn't exist, but to live as fully as Jesus did – no stabilisers on your bike, no comprehensive insurance against all risks. Like Augustine says, you return to your own heart and find him, and you follow him to the amazing places he wants to take you - in this world and the next. Amen.