

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year
Session 9: Ascension – ‘Mind the gap’**



And now we give you thanks because, after his most glorious resurrection, he appeared to his disciples, and in their sight ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us; that where he is, thither we might also ascend, and reign with him in glory.
(Eucharistic Preface for Ascension Day, Common Worship)

1. Ascension Day

The Feast of the Ascension, forty days after Easter Day, commemorates the ascension of Christ into heaven. Its liturgical observance dates back to at least the fourth century, but it clearly has apostolic origins (Luke 24:51, Acts 1:2). The Sunday before ascension is ‘rogation Sunday’, and the three days before Ascension Day are ‘rogation days’—days set aside for prayer (*rogare* means ‘to ask’): in thanksgiving for God’s provision and for protection (a procession marking the ‘bounds’ of the parish and blessing the crops of the field).

The days between Ascension and Pentecost, still part of Eastertide, have a distinctive liturgical character: they are set aside for prayer and anticipation of the coming Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). The paschal candle remains lit up to and including the feast of Pentecost.

2. Resurrection vs Ascension

The resurrection and the ascension are related but distinct events, and one cannot be collapsed into the other. There is a danger of one of two extremes: on the one hand, we might think of the ascension as a literal ‘take-off’ into outer space (think of the stained glass window depictions of Jesus’ feet poking downwards out of a cloud!). But this reading of the ascension is difficult to square with a rationalist, scientific worldview, and has been subject to much criticism.

On the other hand, we might think of the ascension as ‘Christ going to heaven’, accompanied by a non-literal, ‘spiritual’ interpretation of the resurrection: Jesus’s spiritual presence with us now is his only way of being with us. This may be easier to square with modern science, but it ‘over-spiritualises’ the significance of the resurrection and the overlap between God’s space (heaven) and earth. There needs to be a midway between these extremes (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 121). Here are three related ways of understanding the ascension, inspired by aspects of our liturgy, that together avoid these extremes.

2.1 Raising our human nature

The collect for Ascension Day captures one popular understanding of the ascension: the raising of our human nature to the divine nature:

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 ...

A literal reading of this collect is unhelpful (it implies that the purpose of the Christian life is to 'follow Christ into heaven'). But a non-literal reading is deeply profound: if our human nature 'ascends with Christ', then the eternal, divine potential contained in our human lives can be unlocked: our compassion; our awareness of the pain of others; our hope can all be deepened a hundredfold (Rowan Williams, 2013).

2 Kingdom Theology

The creeds speak of Christ 'ascending into heaven, and sitting on the right hand of the Father'. Many of the hymns emphasize the ascension as the beginning of the 'reign of Christ'. This raises the question of the relationship between heaven and earth: rather than these being set in two different locations, they can be seen as 'two dimensions of God's good creation', such that heaven and earth overlap in important ways (Wright, p. 122). The Ascension makes Jesus absent, yet present in new ways: through the Holy Spirit and the sacraments. And this places a responsibility on Christians to live and act in ways that make the kingdom of heaven an earthly reality ('on earth as it is in heaven').

3 The Cosmic Christ

One hymn proclaims, somewhat unhelpfully: 'And still the holy church is here, although her Lord is gone' (*Now to our saviour let us raise*). After the ascension, the Lord is 'gone' in the simple sense of being an agent *within* the world. But the Lord is 'here' as an 'all-pervasive life and agency, elusive and yet more real and solid than anything we could conceive' (Rowan Williams, 2015). This is the truth of the 'cosmic Christ', the one who fills 'all in all' (Eph 1. 15-end). If Christ is no longer an agent within the world but an all-pervasive agency, then it is down to individual Christians and the Church to be agents of Christ in the world.

Next talk: Sunday 27th May: 'Kindle a flame', the Feast of Pentecost

References:

Wright, N.T *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK, 2011)

Rowan Williams, two sermons for Ascension Day, 2013 and 2015, available at <https://kiwianglo.wordpress.com/2015/05/16/rowan-preaches-ascension-tide-sermon-at-the-abbey/> and <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/883/a-sermon-by-the-archbishop-of-canterbury-at-the-ascension-day-sung-eucharist>