

**Lent Compline Talks 2019**  
**St Mary's Kidlington**  
Prof John Morris

**Wednesday of Holy Week: Jesus and disciples at ascension**

Throughout this series of brief talks, we've been looking at what is now called the 'back story' of the events and people involved in the resurrection appearances of our Lord. In the last talk it therefore seems appropriate to look at the final appearance of the resurrected Jesus at the ascension and see what we can learn from that. So first, let's look at the New Testament evidence.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' appearance at the ascension is the only one mentioned apart from the appearance when, on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion, the two Marys are rushing away from the empty tomb to give the disciples the angel's message, and find Jesus standing in their path. He tells them not to be afraid but to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. When the disciples do that, they encounter Jesus 'on the mountain'. And it is there that Jesus gives them their commission to make all nations disciples, to baptize them, and teach them to observe all that he had taught. Furthermore, he gives them the assurance that he will be with them, to the end of time. There is no mention of any ascension. In John, as we discussed last evening, there is the breakfast of fish on the shore of Galilee, but no final commissioning speech or ascension.

The addendum at the end of Mark has essentially the same message as Matthew, but no mention of Galilee. Rather, Mark says that Jesus appeared when the eleven were eating at table and gave them the commission to proclaim the good news to the whole creation. Jesus adds that his believers will be able to heal the sick and speak in strange tongues (a hint of Pentecost) and that, after speaking with them, Jesus 'was taken up into heaven'.

Luke has essentially the same message, but in his gospel it is delivered some time after the fish breakfast in Galilee. Jesus is said to 'open the minds of the disciples so that they can understand the scriptures' and he tells them that, in his name they, who are his witnesses, must proclaim that "repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem". And then there is another hint of a Pentecost addition, when Jesus instructs the disciples to "remain in Jerusalem" till he sends them the "Father's promised gift" - the Holy Spirit. Luke goes on to say that Jesus then led the disciples out from Jerusalem as far as Bethany, which sits atop the mount of Olives (the "mountain" in Matthew's account?), where he blessed them with uplifted hands and, in the act of blessing, parted from them. Again, no specific mention of ascension. However, Acts, which is also thought to be written by Luke, and places the ascension 40 days after the resurrection, starts "I wrote of all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen, he was taken up to heaven". A little later in Acts the disciples are told to "bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth" then "as they watched, he was lifted up, and a cloud received him from their sight". This, of course, is the image beloved by many religious artists, including one painting in which just a pair of feet emerge from the lowest level of a cloud.

It is also in Acts, that we find one more statement that has had a profound effect on some Christian thinking ever since. Chapter 1 verse 10 says "As he (Jesus) was going, and as they were gazing intently into the sky, all at once there stood beside them two men in white who said "Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to heaven, will come again in the same way as you have seen him go." "The link between the sky and heaven is of course a very ancient one; for example, it can be seen in the pyramids and other funerary rites of ancient Egypt which predate Christ by several thousand years.

The theologian James Dunn has called the ascension story “at best a puzzle and at worst an embarrassment” for our age which no longer conceives a physical heaven located above the earth, particularly since we have sent astronauts to the moon who have looked back on and photographed our earth, and astronomers who have used telescopes to peer back millions of light years almost to the origin of the universe. This was not the case when the gospels were written. That and earlier ages believed in a three-tier cosmos, with the heavens above, the ‘underworld’ below, and a flat earth centred on Jerusalem sandwiched in the middle. The visible sky, or firmament separated heaven from the earth. With this concept, humans standing on the earth and looking up would just see just the floor of heaven which, being blue, was considered to be made of lapis-lazuli.

Nor was an ‘ascension to heaven’ an unfamiliar concept for people at that time. In Judaism, steeped in the old testament, it was seen as a sign of divine approval. We have only to think of Elijah ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, watched by Elisha. The concept would also have been familiar to Roman readers; the ascent of the divine emperor Augustus was said to have been witnessed by senators, and Romulus - Rome’s founder - like Jesus was said to have been taken to heaven in a cloud. In centuries to come some of our present-day concepts may seem just as quaint.

No, it is not the physical aspect of ascension that we need to consider, but the idea that having lived, been crucified, and resurrected in a way we also cannot explain physically, Jesus being ‘taken into heaven’ marks the recommencement of his heavenly rule, seated at the right hand of the Father. Again, I have to fall back on familiar words to express inexpressible concepts. We don’t have any words that can describe the life after death which we can now only glimpse ‘through a glass darkly’ (as Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthian Christians). And so we use words we do understand and which enable us to develop a concept - however partial and imperfect - of something we believe to have ultimate reality. An analogy might be our description of an atom of iron. We think of iron as something solid, because that is the limit of ordinary human experience, but physicists tell us that an atom of iron is largely space, with its nucleus made up of a number of charged particles, surrounded by a rotating swarm of charged electrons. And that view, we are assured, explains how iron can be magnetic and conduct electricity.

So, let’s forget attempts at physical explanations, and look at the real core of the ascension accounts - their underlying message. Unlike futile attempt to explain a physical ascension, the final earthly words of Jesus are perfectly clear and should leave us with no doubt of what he expects of us.

We must “make all nations disciples, teaching them”. That sounds a very big order, but I suggest it means that we have a clear duty to talk about - literally “bear witness to our Lord” - and be prepared to explain our faith to those with whom we come into contact (in this part of the world we don’t need to travel abroad to meet people from many nations). This command is what has energised missionaries from Peter and Paul to the present day. We must also “proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins”. Most of us don’t feel we are called to stand in the centre of town holding a placard saying “Repent for the end is nigh!”, but we *are* expected to examine ourselves, our motives and our actions and, where we find we have fallen short, admit it to ourselves and our Lord, with his assurance of forgiveness. Likewise, when we feel that others have offended us, to practice that same forgiveness.

Like Simon Peter, we may well fail on many occasions, but our Lord does expect us to keep on trying to succeed. And we can draw strength from the assurance that our resurrected, ascended Lord will be with us, even to the end of time.