

Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Ascension May 24th

Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 1; Collects 2,5,7

On Sundays, in most Christian churches, the apostles' creed is an integral part of the service, and an important part of that creed is the statement 'He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty'. What I'd like to do today is to explore that statement and its implications because, for me at least, the Ascension is not an easy part of the Gospel story.

In the gospel of Mark is a very brief passage (thought to be a later addition) that, immediately after Jesus appeared to the eleven at Table, 'After talking with them, the Lord Jesus was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God.' It continues 'They went out to make their proclamation everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed their words by the miracles that followed.' Matthew's brief account says 'The eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mount where Jesus had told them to meet him. When they saw him, they fell prostrate before him.' Jesus then gave them the command to "Go and make all nations my disciples", and ended with the assurance "I am with you always, to the end of time." Only Luke provides a more narrative account of the ascension. He says it occurs 40 days after the resurrection and after an appearance to the eleven at table, and he sites it on the Mount of Olives, near Bethany. 'Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and blessed them with uplifted hands, and in the act of blessing he parted from them.' Acts (thought to be by the same author as Luke), has another part of the story. We read that disciples were all together and, after being told that they would receive power by the Holy Spirit and would witness to the ends of the earth, there follows the statement 'When he had said this, as they watched, he was lifted up and a cloud removed him from their sight' and it goes on 'as he was going up and as they were gazing intently into the sky there stood beside them two men in white who said 'Men of Galilee, why are you standing looking up into the sky? Jesus, who has been taken into heaven will come in the same way as you have seen him go.' John, you will recall, has no ascension narrative (he ends with the lakeshore appearance we considered last week). However, earlier in John there are references to ascension when Jesus tells Nicodemus "No one ever went into heaven except the Son of Man who came down from heaven." There's a similar passage in Ch 6. Also, Mary in the garden is told by the risen Jesus "Do not hold me, for I am not yet ascended to my father."

What are we to make of these bible accounts of the ascension? Numerous artists have tried to picture the scene, the disciples looking up, with dramatic swirling clouds, beams of heavenly light, and Jesus in mid-air, indeed he is the focus of the painting. There is one very different painting which I rather like. Yes, there are the disciples and the clouds, but all you see of Jesus is a pair of naked feet sticking out of the bottom of the cloud. (Presumably his sandals were left on earth!). People at that time envisioned a three-level cosmos: the heavens above; the earth centred on Jerusalem in the middle, and the underworld below. It was thought that, if you looked up from the earth, what you saw was the floor of heaven, blue because it was made of lapis-lazuli (a very precious stone actually from Afghanistan). So, for the mind-set of that time, 'going to heaven' must mean 'going up from the earth' and when Jesus couldn't be seen any more the most natural explanation was that he was obscured by a cloud. Those concepts haven't entirely disappeared - who remembers singing as a child at Sunday School 'There's a Friend for little children far above the bright blue sky'? - we have real difficulty thinking about heaven except in visual terms.

However, we now have a very different concept of the sky. Weather forecasters tell us about clouds; the TV gives us pictures of the earth from space, and we have pictures of the earliest galaxies so far away that the light from them has only just reached us. Indeed, the theologian James Dunn has called the ascension story 'at best a puzzle and at worst an embarrassment'; he suggests it should be

seen as a metaphor for Jesus' resurrection and glorification. That is not a new idea; the third century theologian Origen described the account as 'an ascension of mind rather than of body or matter'. And the disciples may not have been as surprised as we might imagine. Jesus is not the only person said to have ascended; the concept was not that uncommon at the time. For Romans, it signified deification of a notable person: Romulus (founder of Rome) was said to have been taken to heaven in a cloud; the ascension of the emperor Augustus was apparently witnessed by the senators. In Judaism ascension was also a sign of divine approval; Elijah ascended 'in a fiery chariot'; Baruch apparently ascended to heaven after 40 days; Levi the ancestor of priests; the 'teacher of righteousness' from the Qumran community; the list goes on. So, ascension was not a concept alien to the disciples. Islamic Sufis speak of human mystical experience as 'ascension' based on the experience of Muhammad who ascended to many levels of heaven, meeting angels, and God himself. Islam believes that Jesus was a human prophet who ascended, but not that he died on the cross.

The ascension clearly had a profound effect on the disciples. Before the ascension they were apparently quite unsure, often hiding away in their house behind a locked door; but after the ascension they travelled back to Jerusalem with great joy and were regularly in the temple praising God and continually at prayer. Their doubts and fears had gone – they were now as convinced of Jesus' divinity and resurrection as they had been of his humanity and death; and they did have the promise of the coming of the holy spirit (which we will consider later). Even before the ascension Jesus promised that he goes 'to prepare a place for us' 'that where I am you may be also.' Thus, any Christian's hope is intimately linked to Christ's ascension. I suggest that *how* Jesus ascended doesn't matter – our human minds can't conceive an existence where time and space are irrelevant. What does matter is that Christ is an integral part of God in heaven and waiting for us, as both judge and saviour, and that where He is, there we may be also. Calvin summarized it in this way: 'The Lord, by his ascension, opened the access to the heavenly kingdom, which sin had shut.'

The ascension marked the end of Christ's earthly mission. On the cross the human Jesus said "It is finished"; his resurrection appearances showed us that the death of the mortal body is not the end of life. The ascension marks the point – in an earthly time sense – when Jesus prepares a place for us with him. In the ascension Jesus left the limitations of time & space into the eternal presence of the Father. Whereas the incarnation limited Jesus in time and space; his ascension freed him from that limitation. During his earthly life Jesus' influence was limited to a small region of the middle east. In ascending, Jesus is liberated to engage in his work for all humanity. In a very real sense Jesus is both absent from us in heaven, but also present with us in spirit – something we celebrate week by week in the eucharist. At the last supper Jesus said "When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again .. that where I am you may be also." This, for us, is a key promise; it provides a visual metaphor of the hope and belief that we too will be resurrected in a new and different form and taken to be with God the Father and Jesus the Son in heaven. Tim Keller, in a book 'Unexpected answers to life's biggest problems' says 'Ascension makes Jesus available to us in a way that he otherwise would not be; and also means that we have Jesus as our advocate before the throne of God'. But ascension is not just about reassurance; it is also about challenge. In his last words Jesus told the watching disciples "Go and make all people my disciples." As we contemplate the ascension, Jesus gives the same command to us. Like those first disciples who returned to Jerusalem, we 20^c disciples must harness the power of worship and prayer to equip ourselves for the task before us to proclaim the good news of the gospel in whatever way is best for us; and, like the disciples returning to Jerusalem after the ascension, to do it 'with great joy', knowing that we too have Jesus' promise "Be assured that I am with you always, to the end of time."

Compline Talks 2020

Prof John Morris, Pentecost May 31st

Psalms 91, 134; Chapter 1; Collects 1,3,4,6

Today, nine days after the ascension, we are celebrating Pentecost. In some traditions, those 9 days are a time of fasting to remember the disciples time of prayer and waiting for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Today, I understand, Pope Francis is taking part on-line in a service alongside many UK church leaders and has urged us to 'Seek a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in order that we might be bearers of Christ's love, light and hope' to a world sadly in need. Adding, 'If there is to be a better future, our hearts must change for the better so that there is less indifference for the suffering of others'. This reminds us clearly that the Holy Spirit works in part through our actions in our world.

Our Compline service uses the words Holy Ghost rather than Holy Spirit. They mean exactly the same. 'Holy Ghost' has rather gone out of use, but this 'ghost' is not the 'spook' of modern parlance. I was interested to discover that the word 'ghost' derives from mediaeval word 'gast' which means breath, animating power, or soul. We still talk of being 'aghast' when something takes our breath away! 'Spirit' comes from Latin 'spiritus' and like 'pneuma' the various words all mean breath. Hence John says 'Then Jesus breathed on them saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit''. Our hymn 'Breathe on me, breath of God; fill me with life anew' asks for the Holy Spirit to descend on us. We think of the Holy Spirit as a 'person' – the third co-equal part of the trinity – because that is the only way we can visualise such an entity.

The word 'Pentecost' comes from a Greek word meaning '50th'. In Judaism, it is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover and known as 'shavuot', 'Feast of Weeks', or 'Feast of 50 days'. It is a harvest festival celebrated 50 days after the 'Feast of Unleavened Bread' when the High Priest took 2 loaves of bread, freshly baked from new wheat, and offered them to God in the Temple. That is the Pentecost that the disciples were celebrating; the renewal of God's covenant with Noah. For us, too, Pentecost is a renewal of God's covenant with mankind, through the Holy Spirit. For us, who have just had the harvest of the resurrection it should be a time of offering our lives anew, freshly blessed by Easter, to the service of our Lord.

The story in Acts is familiar. "When the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them, and resting on each one. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance".

Christ promised the disciples that they would be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' at the last supper and you will remember that, at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, those around saw the spirit 'like a dove' descend onto Jesus head. If our churches had been unlocked today, the priest's robes and the flowers would have been red or orange to recall the 'fiery tongues'. There are echoes of the burning bush; the peals of thunder and flashes of lightning when God gave the commandments to Moses; the fiery pillar of the Exodus. The wind and tongues of flame are simply a sign of God's presence. Rushing wind is another common symbol of Holy Spirit; in France, trumpets are blown to recall the 'mighty wind'; in North-west England, Whit (white) Sunday brass bands are traditional – more 'mighty rushing wind'. And then there is the 'speaking in tongues.' You will recall that onlookers said 'they are drunk', but Peter, as always very practical, said 'They're not drunk, it's only nine in the morning' and explained that it fulfilled the prophesy 'I will pour out upon everyone a portion of my spirit; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions'. Some churches celebrate the 'speaking in many tongues' by reading the appointed scripture in many languages.

Whether 'tongues' refers to the variety of dialects spoken by the gathered disciples or to ecstatic utterance, is not important. Ecstasy means 'outside of oneself' (Greek). Ecstatic states can be induced in many ways: by meditation (the disciples had been constantly at prayer), by breathing exercises, and by psychotropic drugs. Such altered states of consciousness are often perceived as 'spiritual' and interpreted according to religious or cultural traditions. They can certainly cause a permanent change in a person's value system as in 'religious conversion'. Many cultures regard ecstasy as 'divine possession' or 'union with the divine' but, whatever the culture, it is a very intense feeling, as in the ecstasy of St Theresa of Avila, or of St Francis of Assisi. However, the important thing here is not the verbal babbling that cannot be understood – the crowd somehow understood what Peter and the others were saying about salvation through belief in Jesus Christ. Pentecost reminds us of the importance of the commission we have been given, to 'make disciples of all nations.' We can only do that by speaking really clearly about all that we have learned of God. Pentecost must be about clarity and understanding! Jesus promised that 'The Holy Spirit .. will teach you all things and help you remember all that I said to you.' Not for nothing is the Holy Spirit referred to as the 'spirit of truth'.

Pentecost is also about power. Jesus promised 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.' It was a crucial event for the disciples. After the ascension, the eleven had gone back to the upstairs room where they were lodging, with Jesus' brothers and a group of women including his mother Mary. They'd appointed Matthias in place of Judas Iscariot after prayer asking for guidance (which reminds us always to pray when we face difficult decision). Also, we are told they were continually worshipping in the temple and constantly at prayer, something all devout Jews were doing; Pentecost was a pilgrim festival and a holiday. However, the disciples were still a very small group; not the evangelising force they were about to become. This Pentecost changed all that – they became really powerful preachers. Jerusalem was very busy; not only Jews and 'proselytes' (proselytes were converts to Judaism who accepted the Mosaic law and circumcision) but also pilgrims from all over the middle east. Apparently, each heard in their own language 'the great things God has done.' Understandability is therefore crucial when we speak to others about faith. That first day's preaching added 3000 to the number of believers and, within a few decades, important Christian congregations had been established in all the major cities of the Roman Empire.

The book we call 'Acts' or the 'Acts of the Apostles' should perhaps be called the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'. The Holy Spirit will also give us power to live the gospel, although it is not our efforts that will help others to a knowledge of Christ, but the Holy Spirit working through us. Like the apostles we shall have to work hard at the task we have been given (though, unlike them we are unlikely to be thrown into prison, stoned, beaten, or shipwrecked!). In a sense 'we've got it easy', although the indifference and hedonism of 20th century still constitute a formidable challenge.

The Holy Spirit did not enter the world for the first time at Pentecost: the Spirit was active in creation; active throughout the old testament; active in Christ in his healing and ministry; and is active in the world today. We just have to forget concepts of 'before' and 'after' as far as God is concerned. The Holy Spirit is just the same today as on that first 'new' Pentecost – it is we who need to be more conscious of harnessing the strength that the Holy Spirit gives. When we were confirmed, the Bishop said "Receive the Holy Spirit". We don't need tongues of fire on our heads, or to speak in tongues. The Holy Spirit will dwell in every believer and be present through every moment of our daily lives if we will only recognise it and call upon him for guidance and for strength. Pentecost was and is a 'new birth' experience, but not a 'one-off'. It's really an amazing thought – the Holy Spirit is a part of God who can work through us. It is not that we 'get the Holy Spirit' but rather that the Holy Spirit gets us, and can work through us if only we will let him.

Compline Talks 2020, Prof John Morris

Trinity Sunday June 7th; Psalms 4, 31; Chapter 2; Collects 2,4,6,7

Well, here we are at Trinity, after the self-examination and breast-beating of Lent, the drama of Palm Sunday, the last supper, the trial, the Passion and the Crucifixion, the miracle and glory of Easter, then that mysterious period when Jesus still seemed to be around in tangible form but yet not around, then the mystery of the ascension, and finally the drama of the Holy spirit lighting on the heads of each of the apostles and the profound change that caused in them. One week later at Trinity Sunday, we are at the start of that long period of Trinity Sundays with little to mark them as distinctive. Much of the drama of the church's year has been crammed into a few short months. And now what? Perhaps small wonder that some start thinking of weekends or holidays away – "there's nothing particularly special going on in church!"

This year in particular, when covid has meant that the church has been closed since that very first Compline service in Lent and so many of us have been largely confined to our homes and unable to worship together, one of the things that I am sure we are all profoundly grateful for is the modern technology that has allowed us all to keep connected over this very special period of the church's year, and for the adaptability of our church team to harness all that technology for our benefit. But here we are in Trinity – all the excitement, all the drama is over – what are we to make of Trinity Sunday and the 25 weeks that follow before we reach All Saints?

When we pray, to which of the Trinity do we pray; and who acts. Jesus repeatedly prayed to his Father, and he suggests in many passages that we, too should pray to the Father "Whatever you ask of the Father in my name". Paul reminds us that Jesus receives prayer and it would be interesting to discuss to what extent each of us consciously prays to Jesus, to the Father, or to the Holy spirit, and what type of prayer we address to each, because we pray for many different things – for comfort, for strength, for understanding, for healing for ourselves and for others, for our world.

Trinity Sunday in its mysterious way dramatically emphasizes a really important aspect of the Godhead – of which we can only catch glimpses; glimpses from different angles. A geometric analogy might be an equilateral triangle: the triangle is a whole, but it has three different and equal sides to it. It does not matter which way you turn it, it always looks the same but, equally, each of the three points or three sides of the triangle is separate and different.

There are few things that Christians have spent more time arguing about than the Trinity. The followers of Arius held that the Son is distinct from and not co-equal with the Father; another group held similar views about the Holy Spirit. Many non-trinitarian groups exist today: Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, 7th Day Adventists to name just three. I've been trying to read up about all the early arguments and if you want to get a flavour, just look up 'Trinity' in Wikipedia and follow the many links! While our faith should involve understanding, when we try to think about the three-fold nature of the godhead we are hampered because we can only get a clear picture in our mind's eye of Jesus, the Son, and we get that from the gospels where we see God in a very human form who, like us, ate, slept, walked and talked. Our concept of God the Father is inevitably based on our own and other human fathers, on descriptions of visions which go way back (though they usually describe things like pavements of sapphire rather than God himself), and on works of art. As John 1:18 succinctly puts it "No one has seen God at any time." in a real sense we can know God *only* through Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, we have to resort to earthly images for the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost it was "like tongues of fire"; at Jesus' baptism it was "like a dove".

The concept of a God or gods is central to every religion. A defining feature of Judaism in the Old Testament was the concept of one God (Yahweh) rather than many Gods each with their own sphere

of influence. The Old Testament does not speak of God as Father because it lacks the concept of Jesus as God's Son. The Holy Spirit is also very much part of the old testament as 'the divine presence of God himself'; there are 75 references to the Holy Spirit in the OT and 35 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, there are far more in the New Testament despite its much shorter length and the NT also presents the Holy Spirit in much more personalized terms than the old testament. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is implicit in that passage at the end of Matthew's gospel where Jesus, having told his disciples to spread the good news of the gospel, adds 'baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. Indeed, throughout the NT there is an understanding of the threefold nature of God, but it was brought together as the doctrine of the Trinity by the early church to oppose alternative views of the relationships and to defend the Christian church against charges of worshipping two or three gods.

The gospels present somewhat differing views of the trinity: John, more than the others, emphasizes Jesus' divinity from its start, where Jesus is described as the Word, pre-existent and divine "In the beginning was the Word", to its end where Thomas declares "My Lord and my God". The formal 'doctrine of the Trinity', reached substantially its current form by the end of the 4th century, particularly in AD 381 under the leadership of Gregory (one of the Cappadocian fathers and Archbishop of Constantinople) who put the paradox between trinity and unity like this. "No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Three than I am carried back into the One. When I think of any of the Three, I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light". St Augustine related the Trinity to love. "God is love: there is the love of a father for a son, of the son for a father, and the holy spirit as the force of that love which applies to all creation." However, despite this unity and coherence, we often attribute different roles to each part of the trinity. Our view of Jesus is defined by the gospels; we think of God the Father in terms of the caring that each father should do for his children; and we think of God the Holy Spirit in terms of the power with which God acts within the created world.

A concept of the Trinity matters in many ways. It matters because Jesus had to be fully God and fully man to save us. He could make atonement for us only because he himself is fully God. If he were just a good man or a great teacher, his death on the cross would not have the same power. The Trinity therefore isn't an arcane doctrine or mystery; it's our eternal life. The Trinity is our God who loves us and gave his Son, an aspect of himself for us, and who empowers us through the Holy Spirit. Trinity matters also because it shows working together in unity and diversity. Just as the three persons of the Trinity are unique, diverse and yet one; we also live as unique and diverse people, but unified as children of God, who should be working together to further the kingdom of God on earth. Trinity Sunday marks a really important moment for us, because it says "OK, you've received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power it can give. Now it's up to you." *This* is the world in which we have to carry on the gospel message which is so clearly presented in Jesus' great commission "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

It's as if the whole Lent to Pentecost period is a sort of annual blood transfusion which should give us strength and determination to carry on the gospel work for the rest of the year. Trinity Sunday is not some sort of pause 'That's Lent and Easter over for another year, now it's time for a rest'; it's quite the opposite. This is where we are told "Over to you, you are my hands in the world; and, by the way, don't forget to call on the power of the Holy Spirit!" Because we are *not* working on our own; we are *not* left 'comfortless'. in the words of John's gospel that Felicity quoted yesterday, Jesus said "I am the vine, you are the branches which should bear fruit. Abide in me."