

# *do not cling*

a sermon preached on

## *Ascension Day*

29 May 2014

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 28:16-20

“Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”<sup>1</sup> With these brusque words the risen Jesus resists Mary Magdalene’s perfectly-human desire to contain him.

“It is better for you that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraklitos *Paracletos* will not come to you”.<sup>2</sup> Thus Jesus makes it very clear to the disciples that they will be required to relinquish what they imagine to be a final-form manifestation of the divine presence.

Spiritual development – indeed evolution in the widest sense – proceeds via a path of separations, strippings, relinquishment.

If we can remember that the doctrine of the Ascension is precisely that – a spiritual doctrine, not a piece of geographical, mechanical information – then I think we can begin to experience it as a living reality. Moreover, if we can accept the great stripping which is the loss of the three-decker static-state cosmos we inherited from our spiritual forebears – then I think we can begin to experience the astounding liberation which is Ascension when seen in the light of what we now know about reality.

There is *no* literal, physical ‘upstairs’ static-state compartment to which Jesus flies in a rocket-chariot. The cosmos is infinitesimally more expansive than we can comprehend – consisting in myriads upon myriads of ‘dwelling places’.<sup>3</sup> In a cosmos of vast proportions which is expanding at an exponential rate, the Creed’s ‘right hand of God’ cannot be a throne room – fashioned in the image of human monarchs – St Matthew’s ‘great commission’ cannot be a nod to a religious club – fashioned in the image of empires and all collective-mindedness.

We have no excuse now: we *know* this is clinging on to a tangible corpse. The risen and ascended Christ is inviting us into a much more expansive and intangible aliveness.<sup>4</sup>

One of the modern spiritual tragedies is that because some Christians continue to insist on framing Christian theology in terms of a pre-Copernican mindset – not to mention pre-Darwinian, pre-Hubble, pre-Einsteinian frame – a precious and invaluable doctrine such as Ascension is rejected as a meaningless archaism even by many Christians. To ‘get’ the Ascension – to really see it as a truth about you and me – this is only possible, and intellectually credible, if we grow up into the expanding cosmos universe in which we actually live. But if we can, then the Ascension horizon will explode with dazzling illumination for us.

As doctrine, Ascension is a symbol of the very structure of things as we now know them – the very path of life itself. St Paul and other earliest Christian witnesses did not have the benefit of the lens of modern science. Yet in spite of their pre-Copernican formation, even so they caught a glimpse of what we are now beginning to see in Hubble-telescope technicolour.<sup>5</sup>

Grasping concretely onto a Christian mystery even as central as the risen Christ prevents us from encountering the intangible aliveness of the fullness of “the mystery hidden throughout the ages, now revealed”.<sup>6</sup> Only by relinquishing our attempts to contain Christ can the disciple experience their life “hidden in Christ with God”.<sup>7</sup> Only in the separation from the

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:17

<sup>2</sup> John 16:7

<sup>3</sup> John 14:2

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008, p130.

<sup>5</sup> See for example <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/>

<sup>6</sup> Colossians 1:26

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:3

concrete and literal can the disciple experience the “fullness of Christ who fills all in all,”<sup>8</sup> in whom “all things hold together”,<sup>9</sup> the “reconciliation of all things to God”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Ascension gestures to an experience – just as all doctrine is, in the first instance experience. Ascension traces the lines of all human experience. Only in the separation from the concrete and literal can a person come to know the “fullness of Christ who fills all in all” – the reality of reconciliation, mystical union, of all the apparently disparate fragments.

‘As this broken bread was once many grains which have been gathered together and made into one bread; so may we and all things be gathered together into one cosmic bread’.

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 1:23

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 1:17

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:20