

# *God's abiding presence*

a sermon preached on the  
*feast of the ascension*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by father greg davies*

the lections: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Mark 16: 15-20

This Festival of the Ascension of our Lord presents us with all kinds of challenges. The image I have from my childhood has always been that of 'two feet hanging out of a white fluffy cloud'. Then in our readings – we also have those kind of images affirmed as we hear of Jesus being *lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight – or of Jesus being lifted up into heaven . . .* I like to call this 'vertical theology'. Very suspect theology I might add! So if we don't want to subscribe to a view that God is up there – if we want and need to develop an understanding of the significance of this Festival of the Ascension of Our Lord – then how might we do this? In other words how can we build a theology of the Ascension? I guess this question applies not only to the Ascension but our whole Christian faith. I believe we are all called in one way or another to be theologians – not just in an academic sense but in a way that we reflect upon our faith and from that reflection are empowered to more effectively integrate our faith with our everyday life and ministry. This is what theology can do for us. This is what the Education for Ministry program offers – it is just one way amidst many of achieving this goal [and I will speak more about it after our Eucharist tonight]. The EFM program – tries to help us build our own theology by drawing on different sources – be that from our Christian tradition [ie the scriptures and history], from scholars, from our Parish communities, our worship and of course one another. When we engage in conversation with different sources we open ourselves to new insights and perspectives and this is certainly what happened to myself as I read some time ago an article on the Ascension that gave me a new perspective, understanding and meaning to this important festival.

Herbert Anderson [the author of this article] proposed that the Ascension is about empathy because it is about God's understanding of what it is like to be human. I was used to thinking of the Ascension as Jesus leaving so that the Holy Spirit could come and while that is still a valid perspective and understanding, nonetheless Anderson offers a different perspective in what Jesus takes into God's presence in and through his ascension. For example, Mary's tears, Peter's fears, the betrayal of Judas, the boldness of the woman with a haemorrhage, the conversion of Zacchaeus, the sadness of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the courage of Mary Magdalene and so on. Also, Jesus had his own experience of temptation, of being misunderstood by his family and close friends, of suffering alone and dying in shame – again all experiences of the human condition. What Jesus took into God's presence Anderson describes as something like a scrapbook full of pictures of what it is to be human.

Then there are also the pictures from the time just before Jesus ascended that convey the human condition as well: the picture of Simon Peter putting his clothes on to jump into the water to meet Jesus walking on the shoreline is consolation for those times when we do dumb things because we are anxious. For the times we are afraid and refuse to hear good news, we are comforted to know that God has a clear picture of the eleven huddled in a room afraid for their future but too stubborn to believe the report that Jesus had risen. Perhaps we can say therefore that God now knows in a way that perhaps God did not know before the Ascension what it is like to be human?

This whole way of understanding the Ascension of course does not fit easily with our image of the all knowing God. From that point of view, God already knows about being human. Nothing in life is missed by the all-seeing presence of God. However, what we can say I think is that while no doubt God knew about the human struggle before the Ascension, now because of it the human story in some new or different way becomes part of God's revelation.

Perhaps this is a bit like our own human relationships. We may try to understand another person's story from their point of view and set aside our own perceptions of the world, receive their story without judgment and try to imagine a world different from our own. We know how hard this can be – we may think we know or understand yet so often we get it wrong or the limits of the situation simply don't allow us to really know or understand. We cannot really, no matter how hard we try, to fully step into the shoes of another person.

However, what is impossible for us – is possible for God. The Ascension confirms for us that however much God understood about us before the Advent of the Lord Jesus, God now understands what it is like to be human from the inside out. And we know that God knows what it is like for us to struggle with being human. That is why Ascension is the necessary completion of the work of God in Christ and why the Ascension is such a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus.

From the angle of God's understanding, the Ascension is necessary to complete the incarnation of the Word of God. Jesus' earthly ministry is over when our Lord returns to God, and through Jesus God knows us. What this means is that when the Spirit comes to comfort us, it is with the awareness of our struggle that Jesus has brought to God's presence. Yes ironically Our Lord needed to leave us in order to be closer. Because of the presence of the Spirit, our Lord is as near to us as breathing. And because God has received our humanity, we can be sure that it is an understanding presence – an abiding and committed presence – a reconciling and life enhancing presence. We know that God knows what it is like to be human. God knows us better in that sense than we can probably ever know or understand ourselves.

This festival of the Ascension of Our Lord is a gift – a gift that we celebrate tonight and hopefully appreciate in a new way not only in that it makes the gift of the Holy Spirit possible but that it assures us that our struggle to be more fully human is not alien to God, and that God's empathy, God's abiding presence and intimacy has been established for us all - a wonderful and extraordinary gift waiting to be received.