

Ascension Day, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2008, 7.30pm HC

Prayer

About now, at Westcott House Theol. College in Cambridge, weather permitting, following on from their open-air Eucharist, they will be letting off *rockets*, to mark their celebration of Ascension Day. I have discussed the possibility of rockets with the Dean, but he seemed remarkably *un-enthusiastic* about the idea of rockets. I think he may have been concerned for the fate of the Nave ceiling, though I had, of course, intended to let them off *outside*.

Theologically though, despite my enthusiasm for letting them off at every possible opportunity, rockets can be a bit misleading. They continue to give the impression that Christ is 'up there' - rather than down here.

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Well, on a different tack, this has been a poignant week. Specially Tuesday, which was the day Britannia removals arrived to move the rest of Peter and Helen Sill's belongings down to Sussex.

Saying good-bye is not easy. And the closer you are to them, the harder it gets. So, for the disciples to say goodbye to Jesus, the one around whom all their hopes, dreams, vision & future had revolved, was, to say the least, extremely difficult. You feel this tension, particularly in John's gospel, where Jesus speaks to the disciples about leaving them and about the coming of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of John 14, a passage we often use at funerals, Jesus tells them he is going away & says 'Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.' But they clearly *are* afraid; deeply troubled at the idea of Jesus leaving them. They clearly fail to understand what he is on about. Thomas says to Jesus: 'Lord we have *no idea* where you are going. How on earth can *we* know the way?'  
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Just imagine: my daughter saying to me: 'Oh, by the way dad, we're moving to the Far East next week. I don't expect you'll ever see us again. But not to worry, because my mate Sharon lives just up the road and she's got a daughter the same age as Lucia, so you can go & see them instead.//

Well, I mean - **NO WAY!!!!** The very thought is horrendous. Relationships with the people you love are *not* interchangeable. This is **NOT** like trading in the Vauxhall Astra for a new VW Golf. This is serious. This is about the very essence of life. About who we are. Because it is our *close relationships* with others that define us, that make us who we are, that give us a sense of belonging, acceptance and of being loved. And those relationships can't just be horse traded for a different set of names. That's why a parting of ways, or, in particular, a close bereavement, is so painful.

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But Jesus is not talking about a different person replacing him. He is talking about *coming back* to the disciples *in a different way*, this time not limited to a single place & time, nor to just a small group of people. Because: as is Jesus, so is God. And as is God, so is the Holy Spirit. Jesus is promising to come back - *not* as a physical presence - but to dwell *inside* the disciples through the Holy Spirit

The best analogy I can think of is the way in which children grow up. When we are first born we cannot even differentiate between ourselves and our mothers.

And even as our sense of personal identity grows, when we get a bit older, we are still entirely dependant on our parents. But, gradually, we begin to take on more and more responsibility. We go off to school on our own. We hang around with our mates. We rebel, which is about finding out what our own, adult, values are. And, finally we reach *adulthood*, where, more often than not, despite ourselves, we turn out to be almost *exact* replicas of our parents; even if, by now, they have died.

What has happened is not so much that we have *lost* them, but that we have *internalised* them. Not that they become me or I them. I retain my own individuality and integrity of being. But my parents continue to live *in me*. Those of you who know me well will know that I am always quoting my mother. I have also inherited some of my dad's DIY skills, his sense of humour & his penchant for telling stories.

I have my mum's strong sense of the equality of all people, regardless of their background, status, clothing or ethnic origin. Sometimes it is helpful, prophetic even, and sometimes it clouds my judgement, a sort of inverted snobbery. //

I think it would be fair to say that, although both my parents are dead, they still live *in me*, along with many others who have helped shape my life - though perhaps none so greatly as them.

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And so it is with Jesus. He is physically departing, going to the Father. But he is *not* going away. Rather, through the Holy Spirit he remains with us. Grows *in* us. And, providing we allow him, makes us more and more like him. Ascension & Pentecost are intimately linked. The going away of Jesus & the coming of the Holy Spirit are very much part of the same thing. As we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, we grow more and more like Christ. And our faith becomes *internalised*, less dependent on a big Sunday knees up at church & more & more intimately linked with our own daily walk with God. The test of our faith is *not* how we feel at the Ascension Day Eucharist with the choir making our spirits soar.

The test is how we might feel if we were indeed shipwrecked on the desert Island, which Peter Sills talked to us about just a few weeks ago - which is why *silence* and *retreat* are so important - and so revealing - in our relationship with God.//

I am certainly *not* suggesting we don't need to go to church or meet with other Christians anymore, but that the real business is what goes on *inside*, not *outside*. This poem seems to me to express it well. //

When first I stepped inside thy house

Tw'as broad and light and high

And its beauty smote my breast\_

Wher'in did swell the water and the sigh

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And in that place I learned to pray

Relieved of grief's despair

Attended all the live-long day

For healing of the bones, the water and the air.

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But now, *thy* house, is inside *me*//

Its beauty and its space

Are there for grief and hope to be

In tears, in breathing, in *thy* Holy Place.

/////'But now *thy* house is inside *me*'//

That is the point of Ascension. We are not so much looking 'up there'. // We are looking (*touch chest*) '*in here*'. The big question for us is not so much whether we encounter Christ here in this magnificent Cathedral, where it is so easy to feel inspired, in touch with heaven. But whether the risen, ascended Christ is, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, '*within me*'. // Filling me.// Changing me.// Shaping me.// Moulding me into his image.// So that, just as it is normal for me to be half-decent at DIY, to say, just like my mum (& probably hers before her), 'Just do your best love, that's the main thing', to tell the same old stories my dad told me about great grandma Stead & Geoffrey Lister, and to feel my hackles rise when I think the underdog has been unfairly treated.

So too, please God, it should be increasingly the case that, through Christ's Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the values of God's kingdom should grow inside me - and you -

That God should grow in me a clean, generous & compassionate heart; a passion for justice and peace; a concern for the vulnerable & the oppressed; delight in worship & in beauty; a growing love for God & for *all* our neighbours; a strong desire for unity; carefulness for God's creation - and all the Christ-like values of which we so regularly speak//- So that, more and more, we might be moulded into the likeness of Christ.

Ascension reminds us that Christ is no longer physically present with us; that he has gone into the heavens, which, as this cathedral reminds us, are all around us. But it also reminds us that the true place of Christ's Ascension, which is so intimately linked to Pentecost & the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is not up there. It's in here. And in that regard, the Dean is quite right to ban the rockets.

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So, may God give us the grace to allow our risen, ascended Lord, through his Holy Spirit, to well up in our hearts, and to change us, day by day, into the likeness of our Crucified, Risen and Ascended Lord. // Amen.