

Thursday 13 May 2021 - Ascension Day

Sermon Notes

Opening comments

- Ascension Day is the major Festival of church most likely to be overlooked, falling on a Thursday (and never a public holiday in UK).
- Event itself shares elements of mystery with Jesus' other post-resurrection appearances.
- So I'll suggest four ways we might think about the Ascension that might help bring it into sharper focus.

Literal

- Perhaps the most obvious, based on Luke's two accounts, read today.
- Clearly significant event for Luke who closed his Gospel with one account and opened the Acts of the Apostles with another.
- In fact the Acts version is longer - to set scene, first for Pentecost, then for the rest of the book.
- Both accounts are consistent with the 'coming and going' nature of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus - here was his final going.
- Literal approach helps us anchor our understanding of the Ascension in Luke's orderly account - one that's consistent both with Jesus' past and with church's future.

Pictorial

- Picasso painted many pictures of Dora Maar, in many different styles (show image)
- Not everyone appreciated his paintings: one man asked him why they weren't realistic. 'Look' he said, taking a photo of his wife from his wallet, 'This is what my wife looks like'. 'She seems very - flat', Picasso replied.
- Perhaps it's the same with Luke's accounts of the Ascension - they incline us to worry about how the Ascension happened, where precisely Jesus went to, who the men in white were and so on.
- Perhaps we then lose sight of the overall picture which requires our imaginations to explain the Ascension as a gateway between Jesus in his earthly body and Jesus exalted at God's right hand in his heavenly body.
- I explore the implications of this at greater length in the Talk about the Ascension which will be available from next Tuesday.
- But for now, some people may find this pictorial, imaginative approach a welcome antidote to Luke's orderly but perhaps rather flat accounts.

Linguistic

- Whole idea behind the Ascension is 'going up' with emphasis on 'up'. Luke 24:51 - Jesus taken up to heaven; previous verse, Jesus lifted up his hands to bless the disciples.
- Similarly in Acts account, Jesus taken up. and then disciples stand looking up.
- Whole idea of 'up' is positive, just as 'down' is negative.

- Think about everyday phrases: onward and upward (quite frequent in pandemic); or just the act of saying up, up and away gives us a lift.
- Contrast with all the down imagery - I'm feeling down today, run down, down in the dumps, down at heel, down and out, etc etc.
- Thinking of the Ascension as the ultimate 'up' may help us grasp something of its character and its importance - and give us a lift too.

Experiential

- At first blush difficult to think how we can use our own experience to help understand the Ascension - we weren't there, didn't see it.
- But not about seeing, about aligning our hearts with Jesus.
- If we think of Ascension as another manifestations of God's power, like the resurrection (and Luke's given us some extra hints in the cloud and men in white), it ought to affect us, just as resurrection should. Both shatter our expectations and point us towards God.
- Just heard choir singing 'Hail the day that sees him rise ...'. After the praise of Jesus in the earlier verses, Wesley points out the effect the Ascension should have on us - longing to be with Jesus, either in God's presence or when he returns to earth.
- Though the Ascension happened 2000 years ago, it's as important, and accessible, to us now as to the disciples who experienced it then.
- It sets the seal on all the resurrection promised us.

Closing comments

- Encourage you to explore Ascension further with me in next Tuesday's talk.
- In meantime think about how God has enabled us to look at things in different ways. We may not see in four dimensions but the Ascension is multi-faceted.
- Each of the four approaches I've suggested - literal, pictorial, linguistic and experiential - just like four different paths up a mountain, offer us different perspectives, different views, different understandings.