

To the Heart of God

Sunday after Ascension – Canon Neil Patterson

I will remove from your body the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh

This sermon has to serve for both the 8am and 10am services, and so I am taking the liberty of preaching on the theme of the Ascension rather than directly on the readings. Any of you who were here on Thursday evening will know that the actual festival had no sermon, but instead the subtle musical reflections of Messiaen on the Ascension played by Mr Walton with characteristic excellence at different parts of the service including the sermon slot.

So, now we all carry round portable entertainment on the phone in our pocket, these sort of things have declined. But I suspect many of you will have at least sometime as a child played ‘Animal, Vegetable or Mineral.’ I seem to associate the game especially with long car journeys, though I discover it actually comes from a 1950s television show which I imagine my parents saw as children, and which some of you may remember. There the objects were presented for interrogation by a panel of experts. As we played it, one person in a group thinks of an object in the world, and the other person or people have to identify it by narrowing down the options, starting always with the question, ‘Animal, Vegetable or Mineral?’ after which as I recall, you are only allowed binary choices like (for a vegetable), ‘Is it a woody plant?’ ‘Is it deciduous?’ and so on until you get to ‘The oak tree at the bottom of the garden.’

What I also recall was that the answer to the first question, nine times out of ten, seemed always to be ‘mineral.’ Because that encompasses not only all the hard stuff of the earth that the word might suggest, but all other inanimate objects as well, including of course all our toys and possessions that sprang to mind as we tried to think of a difficult suggestion. And it is of course the case that we live in a world of physical stuff, ever more with passing time, that we have made to surround us. Yet when it comes down to it, the things that matter most are the vegetable and animal, because we need them to eat, and then most of all, that particular subset of the animals that is people. And perhaps part of the learning of life for most of us is that people matter more than all the things to acquire and places to discover.

This is, at any rate, part of the meaning at the heart of the Christian faith, and that part of Christian doctrine which is the central theological truth of the ‘Incarnation and Ascension,’ the union of God with humanity. You probably haven’t heard it called that before, but the more one reflects on the Ascension the clearer it becomes that it is both the mirror and

the completion of the Incarnation, and so I wonder if we should not always talk about 'Incarnation and Ascension' as one phrase, just as we do also talk about 'Crucifixion and Resurrection' as we acknowledge that neither really makes sense without the other. It may be that I am getting a bit abstract, so let us remember the actual events.

When we talk of the Incarnation, we tend to do so in the context of Christmas, God coming to earth as a baby in Bethlehem, and are helped by all the carols and pictures that have imagined the unimaginable wonder of the creator of all things being found in the manger. When we talk of the Ascension, we have the puzzling image of the risen Jesus rising into the air and disappearing into a convenient cloud, and the associated art often looks strange or downright silly, like the chapel in the Anglican shrine at Walsingham where three-dimensional plaster feet and a hem of a robe project from the ceiling above the Apostles. We've all seen a mother with her baby, but I doubt any of us have seen a dear friend float up into the clouds. But the doctrine made by the image is something extraordinarily deep – that the human flesh of Jesus, risen from the tomb and transformed in ways that the Gospels do not make especially clear, left this earth again for God.

That the Ascension is central to the doctrine of the Incarnation is made explicit in the text known as the Athanasian Creed, which some of you will know from the translation provided (but now very seldom read) in the Book of Common Prayer. The view now is that it has nothing to do with Athanasius, and is possibly better not described as a Creed! It is an ancient statement of faith, best known for the very lengthy emphasis on the three persons of the Trinity, and for containing declarations on the damnation of those who do not believe in the correct manner. But it also includes a concise description of the union of God and human in Christ, building on the theology of Augustine. My best modernisation of the archaic and gendered wording in the Prayer Book, with the help of the original Latin, is that Christ is, **'one, not by conversion of divinity into flesh, but by taking up humanity into God.'**

God and humanity are united in Christ for eternity, but that union has two moments that make it real, and the beginning and end of Jesus' necessarily time-limited life. And it is because of the Ascension that we have the paradox that he is 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' and through whom the world was made – so that to be made in his image is to have been made in the human image of Jesus who was not yet born but who was somehow already in the eternity of God. The heart of God is not an abstraction. It is the heart of the one who walked the roads of Galilee, and wept for his friend Lazarus, and commended his mother to his beloved disciple from the Cross.

And on this Sunday after the Ascension, we remember too that this point in the Christian story is a bridge, between the one earthly life of Jesus, bound by time and space, and the

mission of his Church to all the world that began at Pentecost. This is, I suggest, what he meant when he said that the Spirit could not come unless he departed. Yes, redemption had to be achieved by a particular person, born to a particular people in a particular time and place – because otherwise it would not be true humanity. But only when that particular humanity is taken into the Godhead could the working out of that redemption begin across the world. This is why the disciples must turn from looking up to heaven, and prepare for the work to which they will be sent.

In the same way, we are at the turning point of the Christian year. We have followed the story from Advent, through Jesus birth, temptation, ministry, death, Resurrection and now Ascension. We rejoice in the truth that it is his work, not our own, that saves us and all people, and praise God for it all. But now as Pentecost approaches we remember too that ours are the hands and hearts that do his work on earth today, and the world has need of the love he revealed. I was confirmed on this Sunday of the Church's year, 28 years ago, so it is always a handy reminder to me of that call to service. So heed the words of the angels, 'why gaze up into heaven?' We have a Kingdom to build.