

Ascension Day

Jn 17, 1-11a

June 1st, 2014 (Sunday) or May 29th (Thursday)

Easter as ASCENSION

A central question about the feast of the Ascension is that of the apparent **absence** of Jesus it suggests.. If Jesus left this world at the Ascension, are we living now in his absence? Or is he still present, but in a different way? He is? In what way?

To think about it, we need to realise that the idea of ascension is a very **Jewish** one. We might well trace its history in Jewish thought, in the Hebrew scriptures, and then in the gospels. .

The question of the **absence and presence of God** is central to Hebrew faith. The basis of it is the presence, the real presence of God in **all creation**, in the entire universe or world – and particularly wherever Jews are. But as the Hebrew people see it, there is a **history** in which that presence was not so clear, a history of ups and downs (ascending and descending?) for that presence of God.

Egypt ruled the whole world, and its Emperor was the equivalent of God in Egypt and indeed was present to the whole world. The Hebrew God liberated the chosen people from Egypt and Pharaoh – in the **Passover** – and in that act promised them that the whole world would be recreate for them, for them to live in, and for God too, for God to live in too. The world would be once again the residence of God. It would be like a new creation.

That would be historically down the line. Meantime, in the interim, God would be present to them in a **tabernacle** erected by them in the desert. It was meant to be a symbol, and a foretaste of the coming cosmic presence. When they arrived in the Land, the tabernacle gave way to the **temple** – again a symbol, a more lasting symbol, of the universal presence.

That first temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were exiled to **Babylon**. But their God never went to Babylon. He had nowhere to go, so he stayed in heaven. For Hebrew thinking, there is something paradoxical about God staying just in heaven! It didn't feel right! God didn't feel right about it! The Hebrew God was meant to be here with us, not in some faraway heaven...

During the exile, and more so after the return and the building of the second temple, there were **secondary ways** in which God was present to the people. One was by revelation, through the prophets. Another was in prayer, mystical prayer, in which Jews often saw God riding a chariot in heaven – this is called Merkabah mysticism, (Merkabah is the Hebrew word for a chariot). Part of this mysticism was a new insight into the Torah, not as Law but as the lifestyle God wished for the people until God, and the Kavod (the Glory) returned one day...to be present again to them...

We have here the beginning of an **apocalyptic** approach to Jewish faith. It comes out clearly in Dan 7, speaking about a mysterious character called the **Son of Man**. This personage is in heaven. He then **descends** to earth, on mission there. Mission

accomplished here, he spends a long time in heaven (to which he has ascended from earth). Then, when God returns to earth, to God's people, the Son of Man descends with God. You get glimpses of that in the Pentecost story, and with Stephen, and Paul, and perhaps, in Luke, the ancient Simeon in the temple – he longed for it and got it.

There were other **ascensions and descensions** in the Hebrew tradition. **Elijah** ascended without dying. **Moses** – in some versions of his departure – did so too. They did not redescend until the time of Jesus, in fact until Jesus' transfiguration. After that they went up into the cloud (heaven, divine presence) again. I might be allowed to think they reappeared at the empty tomb on Easter morning, ready for Pentecost.

What about **Jesus**?

In the **tradition that most of us inherited**, Jesus rose at Easter and ascended to heaven forty days later. No problem. We accept that it just happened that way. But the evidence is a bit more complex. The gospels treat it in different ways.

In **Mark**, the earliest gospel, there is a promise that Jesus will appear to his own, after resurrection, in Galilee. But in Mark, at least as we have his text now, Jesus never did....In Mark, the risen Jesus never went anywhere, or ascended anywhere....

In **Matthew**, there is indeed an appearance of the risen Jesus in Galilee, but there is also an earlier and a later one. The earlier one is in Jerusalem, to the women. The later, final one is undated, and is often assumed to be the ascension, but Matthew never calls it that. What Jesus might have done, or where he might have been, in between such appearances, is not addressed.

In **Luke/Acts** there is a series of appearances, all in Jerusalem. It is from Luke, in Acts, that we know of the 40th day after Easter vision, on which he ascends to heaven. The ascension belongs to Luke.

In the **tradition that came to us**, we were taught that Jesus was raised at Easter, with a body suited to and able to live here on earth. This body was not suited to and able to live in heaven. Sp 40 days later, Jesus was raised (again, if you like) with a body suited to and able to live in heaven (Paul called it a spiritual body). It is a two step process. Paul and Mark stay with the first step of it, and simply call that resurrection. The later synoptics, Matthew and Luke, have the two step process, see the first step as resurrection and the second one ascension.

John tries to combine the two approaches.

But – if we give up asking how - **why** did Jesus, having risen, then ascend to heaven? In good Hebrew theology, I think it was to get a gift, for himself, and then give that gift to people here on earth. It was the **gift of prophecy**. That means the ability to experience the Kingdom in its coming, and to let others share in that experience by putting meaningful words on it for them. They were saving, prophetic words. Jesus had this gift of the Spirit since his baptism, but then it was **for Israel only**. To get the gift in its fullness, for all the nations as well as Israel, he had to go to, that is, **ascend**

to heaven. And he had to come back and give it to his own here. That **coming back** is Pentecost, with the fire and the gift of understood speech in every language. So Jesus' ascension includes his return. You can't and don't have an ascension and that's it. Not for Jesus, anyway. It is part of something larger.

We have, I think, an impression that Jesus was the first and only human being to have really ascended into heaven. It is then a bit surprising to read 2 Cor 12, where **Paul** tells us that he himself has ascended into the third heaven, and that he has been in paradise itself, where he has done a heavenly journey. Paul is the only human we know to have done that, and come back, and written an autobiographical account of it.

There was a general cultural and religious impression in the Ancient Near East that ascension into heaven didn't happen, at least as a normal, ordinary thing. In fact, the opposite was the rule. When you died, you went **down, not up.** You stayed dead, there was no resurrection from the dead, you went to the underworld, and never came back up to this world. The Hebrews called it Sheol. Heaven, or the heavens, was the realm of the gods (or God). There were stories of Enoch walking with God - and then he was not - because God took him. We cannot penetrate the deliberate ambiguity of that statement. There were stories of Elijah in a chariot of fire in the heaven - but there is a real probability that heaven on these texts means our sky. Other stories imagined human heroes invading the heaven of the gods....Mortals ought not try to go to the place of the Immortals....

There were stories among the Hebrews of someone ascending to God/Heaven **to receive a revelation,** and to **return** here with that revelation. It was a visionary experience. Note that a round trip is included in this story of the visit above. So Moses ascended to heaven, and not just to the top of mount Sinai, to get the revelation of the Torah and bring it back to his people. He was then considered to be quasi-divine. Isaiah and Ezechiel had similar experiences. Greek culture preferred to have their enlightened ones remain on earth, and be given an epiphany, or an oracle, often in a dream, and to infer a new insight from omens and signs. Over the course of time, the Hebraic and the Hellenic models seem to have mingled.

The ascension motif then included the idea of an entry of the ascending person into a new kind of existence, **loosed from the bond of mortal conditions here on earth.** This implies a permanent change - it implies a resurrection so that Sheol is not forever, and/or an immortality of the soul (if not also the body). Enoch and Elijah, and the son of man in Daniel, are good examples of this. The ancients did not deal well with death, and ascension seemed to them to be a good way out of it. The book of Daniel is perhaps the latest in the Hebrew Canon. There is no uniform understanding of death, or a projected ascension, at the time of Jesus and that of the New Testament. Wouldn't it be nice to think of ascension as a norm for all of us?

In the Jewish traditions, from the first century bce onward, there are mentions of temporary ascension into heaven within mortal life, as **a foretaste** of the heavenly world. It is first noted in the Similitudes of Enoch (written at that time). It is there later in the mystical writings of Merkabah and Hekhalot. Parallel with this, in rites of initiation of Greek and Roman religions (as noted in Poimandres and Cicero), there is mention of ascension-experience.

Against this background, it is a bit of a shock to realise that **the ascension of Jesus is mentioned only once in the New Testament (by Luke)**. It is also a bit of a shock to realise how easily we now talk about it, and about going to heaven when we die.... It might help us be good here....

So I am tempted to muse that **the ascension –as usually imagined - is a good story that didn't happen!** I am tempted to think that Jesus, risen, among us, remained as he was, and didn't move up up and away anywhere else. If you see him as living unitive consciousness since his resurrection, what do you mean by 'else'!

Remember the beloved disciple at the tomb on Easter morning. That empty tomb was a font of baptism for him, a place where he would be one of the first to have the unitive consciousness of resurrection. It is all interior. It is a new kind of Sabbath. He intuitively knows he must remain, not follow anyone else; to remain in the place of initiation. He stays, while the other one (Peter) walks.

Remember the question the disciples put to Jesus when they first met him. They asked Jesus: where do you remain? And he said, Come and see.....

Resurrexi, et adhuc tecum sum, alleluia
Posuisti super me manum tuam, alleluia
Mirabilis facta est scientia tua, alleluia

I am risen, and so I cannot be without you;
We are in permanent contact, hand in hand;
Our unitive consciousness is beyond language, alleluia

On this day 7 of creation, we are asked to have a Passover from walking away to remaining with... Unitive consciousness includes not walking away.....

O Lord, you search me, you know me
I am the place you can rest after your rising
You know me in our rest and our rising

Domine, probasti me, et cognovisti me:
Tu cognovisti sessionem meam, et resurrectionem meam

[The monks of Gethsemani abbey will chant it for you on their website.]
