

Ascension Sunday 2017

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

I studied theology and philosophy for 6 years in the end. It was never my intention to spend a lot of my twenties doing that but God seemed remorseless about it. There were times when I was studying at Manchester, sitting in the stacks, poring over some ancient writing I could barely understand when the thought occurred to me. What's the point of it all? Why does someone think I need to know this? I wonder whether such thoughts ever occur to you as you listen to us preach. That reasonable doubt or that exasperation about useless information that someone else thinks is interesting. The Yes but voice. The O please cut to chase voice. What's the point of it?

What's the point of Ascension? Why do we come to celebrate it every year? I hope to take you there in short order.

So we need to start with two questions. What happened? What did the disciples think that it meant?

What happened was that the Jesus they loved, revered, tried to obey and follow was judicially murdered in public. There was no doubt he died. There was no doubt he was buried. Then he came back to them from the dead. The same but different. Think about it. If someone were taken down from hours and hours of crucifixion and they were just in a coma they wouldn't be walking about 3 days later. They would be traumatised and physically broken the rest of their life. Jesus was different. He was really alive. Like when you see someone after they have been ill and made a total recovery, you say Wow you look great! Or mothers after child birth in that bloom of joy and health. You look terrific. But it was even more than that.

If you have walking round Malvern with your eyes open these last two weeks after the rain, you have been seeing a miracle. England in the spring. One of the wonders of world. Amazing, wonderful, gentle beauty. How fortunate we are to live among such loveliness.

This other Eden, demi-paradise, ...

This precious stone set in the silver sea ...

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

Heaven on earth.

Not quite. A short ride on the train to Erdington would tell a different story – ugly, tedious, traffic, litter. I went up there to work at the YMCA some weeks ago and the lady in the ticket office said Are you coming back today? I said, I certainly am. Erdington's not a place to linger in. The guy behind me said in protest, I live in Erdington. I said, I bet not on the main street. No, he said, no that's true.

But come back to Malvern. What if Malvern in all its beauty is still part of a broken world? What if there is another Malvern, in another kingdom, in another place and time and that Malvern is perfect - beauty, radiance, light shining through it. Unspoilt and beyond spoiling. It is possible. Indeed, it is quite likely.

Jesus came back to us for a while after the resurrection. He came back as He now is in that place which His own. The perfect place. Where there is nothing to harm, hurt, spoil or destroy. The same but oh so different. The forerunner, the pioneer, the one who got there first. He was around again for 40 days. Just over a month. In Lloyd Douglas' book *The Robe*, one of the characters is looking down the dusty road in Palestine. What are you looking for? asks another character. He says, Well, you never know with Jesus. He could suddenly be here, it is unpredictable. See the man talking to that group, it might be him?

Then it stopped and he went back to that other place. And that's the way it has been ever since. The meaning the disciples put on it was that it was the final chapter on something.

as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

So they called it the Ascension, not because Jesus ascended somewhere in the blue yonder, but that he ascended a throne.

Jesus received power and authority. Thrones are always up steps. You ascend to a throne.

What did they see? Well, it is a bit hard to know but they knew what it meant. It meant closure. Language about kings and thrones I find difficult. I wonder whether you do? I have seen a couple of thrones. I have seen the ancient throne of England in Westminster Abbey and thought My... some sorry royal backsides have sat on you over the centuries. I saw a throne especially made for Queen Victoria in the House of Lords. It was tiny and the arms were scratched bare because she was so nervous.

Jesus won something at the Cross – reconciliation, victory over sin and evil, the kingdom coming from another place that will draw everything in this place through death into that place. We use picture language. As if language. It is as if he was enthroned. As if he were at God's right hand.

This how Peter described it in his letter

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

If Jesus won then love won, then freedom won, then justice won. If Jesus won then the darkness is fading and there is a new world, this world perfected, this world made new.

So again, I ask the question What's the point? The point is that if love has won, if grace has won, if welcome and hospitality and forgiveness have won then we may indeed come boldly, come with confidence to the throne of grace, the place of victory, the place where Jesus meets us. Because there is nothing to fear any more. In ancient language we come to a throne. A throne where grace, generous, delightful love welcomes us.

This sets Christianity apart from other faiths. If we took the other three great world faiths, we would find they have a commonality of approach. Morality will lead you to salvation. Buddhist practice will lead to enlightenment. Hindu morality will, after many life times, mean your release from endless incarnations. If you are Muslim then Islamic practice will mean Allah will receive you after death. Christianity can sound like this – obey the Bible, come to church and maybe you go to heaven. But this is untrue to real Christian faith. Authentic Christian faith inverts the process and says God blesses us with his salvation from the outset, his forgiveness, his approval is given to us before anything on our part. Then we change our behaviour out of love, out of freedom, out of gratitude. If Jesus has won then there is nothing we need to do to experience his welcome.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

What is the point? This is the point. Christian salvation is grace plus nothing. Grace plus nothing. A throne of grace. There is nothing you have to do but enter into it, to come believing and receiving to the place of prayer to find endless grace and endless understanding and endless acceptance. You just come. No hoops to jump through. No classes to go to. You don't have to get religious. You just come.

Many of you will have been to have a look at Madresfield Court. Do you remember the massive oak doors the other side of the moat? There are no handles on the outside of the doors. You have to get someone to let you in. It was meant to be impregnable. This is what we are talking about. There is a place that Jesus went to – a place we call heaven, that is impregnable, doors that cannot be forced open, that is our true home, that is where all earth's loveliness is made perfect, renewed, released, made safe. Nothing will be lost. It is your true home. Jesus ascended to rule that place. You cannot force your way in. It cannot be burgled. You cannot break in. The terrorist cannot enter. But you may approach those great doors with confidence and boldness because they will open for you. They are expecting you.

There is great Lutheran hymn of arrival, written by someone who found their way to this throne of grace...

*Now I have found the ground wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain--
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heav'n and earth are fled away. ...*

*Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies--
Father, Thy mercy never dies!*

*Fixed on this ground will I remain,
Though my heart fail and flesh decay;
This anchor shall my soul sustain,
When earth's foundations melt away.
Mercy's full pow'r I then shall prove,
Loved with an everlasting love.*

Andreas Rothe, the writer of that hymn, knew something. Some of you, many of you, know what he knew. Because Jesus is our ascended Lord we may come boldly, confidently to a throne of grace knowing we will receive through all eternity and always, always find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.