

Ascension's tide

I expect that most people here in the Netherlands knew that last Thursday was Ascension Day because here, unlike in the UK, it is a public holiday. I wonder, however, in this secular age, how many people know the story of what happened on Ascension Day. I wonder if people know of how Jesus took leave of his disciples, mysteriously disappearing from their view some 40 days after his resurrection. The Christian church portrays this strange event of Jesus' ascension into heaven as a kind of coronation, with Jesus taking his place at the right hand of God the Father from where he rules over all. But if people today are not very familiar with this story, well, maybe it's just as well. After all, this is one Christian belief that is highly problematic, if not downright embarrassing. You may have seen pictures of the ascension with Jesus floating up into the sky, surrounded by wisps of cloud, or even pictures of Jesus lifted up from the ground with his feet sticking out of the cloud! Indeed, even in Cambridge, that global centre of learning where I used to teach, the Theological Colleges still hold an Ascension Day service that culminates in fireworks, with rockets soaring up into the sky – hardly appropriate in a scientific age with its modern understanding of the universe. So maybe it's as well if people don't know the story too well. You might say that the ascension, as traditionally understood and pictured, would be a laughing stock for science and contemporary understandings of the universe. Well, with that in mind, I want to be deliberately provocative this morning by thinking of the ascension by using two scientific analogies. I want to explore Christ's ascension by using two scientific images and this, I know, is extremely dangerous for I am anything but a scientist, but I'll take the risk.

Let's return first, however, to our text from John's Gospel where we find the disciples gathered together in the upper room in Jerusalem with Jesus, shortly before his arrest, while Judas has already gone off to betray Jesus, slipping out the room and into the night. And I want to focus on that figure of Judas, who Jesus refers to as 'the one destined to be lost', for in him surely we meet the whole mystery of evil. Why on earth did he do it? Why did he betray his Lord? There has been much speculation about Judas and attempts to rehabilitate him and portray him in a better light, but from the testimony of

Scripture all we can say is that in him we see the face of evil. And evil features elsewhere in this passage as well. As Jesus goes on to pray for these disciples he says, 'I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.' In that simple prayer reference is made once again to the reality of evil, this mysterious force that entered Judas and that stalks the world, resisting Jesus and his followers and defying his rule, opposing and disrupting it. And in Jesus' death on the cross we believe that we see God absorbing evil and triumphing over it, but that victory is not complete until Christ has ascended.

And here comes the first analogy from science, albeit a rather dated one. You will doubtless have heard of the great Greek scientist Archimedes, famous for leaping out of his bath and shouting 'Eureka!' Well, here is something that Archimedes once famously said. He said, 'Give me a point outside the world for a fulcrum and I will move the world with a lever.' Give me a point outside the world and I will gain leverage on the world so that I can move it. And maybe that is an image for thinking about Christ's ascension. You see one of the terrible features of evil is its inertia. What Jesus refers to here as 'the evil one' is so difficult to shift, to budge. It's as if this 'evil one' grips the world and holds it fast. And so we find ourselves locked into structures of injustice and we find ourselves colluding with destructive behaviour patterns and it's so very difficult to change things from within. We need something to impact us from outside, from beyond.

For example, it's just ten days or so since the General Election in the United Kingdom and despite all the hype and the frenzy many people are deeply cynical about elections and politics generally. And one reason for that is that despite all the promises and the propaganda so little seems to ever really change. So much is promised but too often so little is delivered. And every now and again something happens that promises real change and hope rises for something different and it's happening in Scotland right now with the spectacular success of the Scottish Nationalist Party, and their cry is that with their electoral success it will no longer be 'business as usual'. And perhaps it won't, but you can understand why many are cynical. Inequality and injustice and privilege seem so entrenched, so dug in, so embedded, so resilient.

'Give me a point outside the world for a fulcrum and I will move the world with a lever', says Archimedes. And in Christ, in the ascended Christ, we have a point outside the world, a fulcrum by which God can shift this inert

world and bring change and bring life. And wherever breakthroughs in justice take place, and whenever tyranny is overthrown, and whenever newness breaks into weary lives that struggle with burdens too heavy to bear, there the leverage of the ascended Christ is felt and there is the hope of deep and lasting change.

Then we turn to our second scientific analogy and let me introduce this by telling you about an ancient custom that used to be carried out on Ascension Day on a beach near Whitby in Yorkshire in England, where people used to plant what was called a Penny Hedge. Now, 'Penny' here is short for penance, because this hedge was planted in an act of penance for a group of noblemen who in the 12th century beat up a poor monk near Whitby. The monk, on the point of death, forgave the noblemen but stipulated, as penance for their sin, that on every Ascension Day they must construct on the nearby beach a hedge made out of stakes and woven twigs and that had to withstand three tides. Now, I don't understand what that's all about but I am intrigued by the connection between the ascension and the tide.

I never cease to be fascinated by the moon and its influence upon the earth. Did you know that it is the orbit of the moon with its gravitational pull that holds the earth steady and firm upon its axis? Did you know that without the moon orbiting the earth would wobble on its axis and it's the hold of the moon that steadies it and makes life viable. And maybe we can take that as an image of Christ's ascension, this Christ who holds sway over the world steadying it and holding it firm when it threatens to shake – and who holds us firm when our lives are shaken. And then of course there are the tides. The moon casts this strange sway upon the earth, exercising its pull upon the oceans. And even if we can't see the moon, even if it is obscured by clouds and the night is dark and we cannot locate it, still the tide is drawn to the shore. And maybe that is the way with the ascension of Jesus. We can't see the ascended Christ. He is not literally located somewhere 'up there' in the sky and the ascension was not a journey through space. And yet like moon upon the tide we see the effects of his ascension all around us. We experience it here in the world.

Just think of that scene in the upper room in our reading, with this vulnerable group of disciples, and what is so poignant is that here we have the total achievement of Christ's life. Here we have the result of his ministry – a group of uncomprehending, infuriatingly dim and fickle followers. One has already scarpered to betray him, another will shortly deny him, and the rest will

soon scatter and abandon him. And nothing much has changed a result of Jesus. The Roman empire continues as before, with ‘business as usual’. And apart from a few healed people, and a few cleansed lepers, and apart from one or two resuscitated corpses who will soon die again, that’s it. And maybe we can imagine Jesus looking round at this gathering of losers and his heart sinking. ‘Here I am on my way to my death and here is the legacy of my life. This is my life’s work. Wow!’ And yet Jesus prizes these disciples. And he is praying for them, praying God to steady them, praying his Father to protect them, to look after them, praying that they may be made holy as he prepares to send them out into a hostile world. And then we turn to the Book of Acts and there in our reading Jesus’ ascension has just passed and already we see its effects upon this group of disciples – like the moon upon the sea. Now it is time to replace Judas, the betrayer, and here we witness Joseph called Barabbas and Matthias as they are proposed as candidates and the disciples cast lots, for it is not for them to choose – they must leave it to the Lord. And so Matthias is added to their number and here we witness the pull of the ascended Christ as the twelve are gathered and reconstituted. And soon they will be poured out upon the ancient world like a great tidal wave, transforming it and bringing a great surge of new life.

And ever since Christ has drawn people into his church. Ever since the ascended one has drawn and gathered people in God’s name. And he has given them God’s Word, and he has sanctified them by his truth, and he has sent them out into the world, just as he prayed back there in the upper room for those first disciples. And wherever people confess Christ and wherever they are gathered together in his name and wherever they bear witness to God’s truth, there we see the effects of the ascension, like the moon on the tide.

And so to us here this morning. What is it that brings you here? What is it that gives you the slightest inclination to gather in Christ’s name? What is it that gives you the faintest desire for God’s Word? What is it that spurs you to pray and to praise? Why is that there stirs somewhere in your heart the faint glow of a love for God? And what is it that prompts you to confess Christ as Lord? Well, let me tell you: it’s the pull of Christ’s ascension that casting its sway upon us. It’s ascension’s tide.

So, here is the Gospel: Jesus is ascended. He is as beyond us as the moon, and yet we sense him everywhere, drawing us, holding us, steadying us through all our doubts and our struggles and our pains and our failures. And

he's praying for us. Our lives are held in his orbit – held forever under the sway of his love. Amen.

O ascended Christ, Lunar Christ,
casting your sway upon us,
bringing your rule to bear,
steady this world and hold it firm in you love.
We pray today for the people of Nepal,
shaken by yet another earthquake even as they try
to rebuild after the first one.
O Jesus, when the earth quakes and the seas roar
and the mountains are cast into the sea then hold us fast,
and sustain us and help us to rebuild what is destroyed.
And as you prayed for your vulnerable disciples

facing a hostile and threatening world,
so we pray today for Christians at risk everywhere,
Christians persecuted for their faith,
Christians attacked by extremists,
Christians discriminated against.
And as we pray for them so we pray for all
who suffer for their religious or political views,
for prisoners of conscience and all who suffer for the cause of right.
And Lord Jesus, you prayed for your disciples to be one.
Unite your people, we pray, in all our diversity
and enable us to present a united witness to the world.
And we pray for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland
to which we belong and which meets this week in Edinburgh.
O God, guide its deliberations;
be present especially where matters are debated which provoke strong and
conflicting opinions
and help us in those times especially to respect different views,
and to discover how to move for ward together remaining united even where
there are matters that would deeply divide us.
O God endow with your Holy Spirit your Church worldwide,
and the Church of Scotland, and this English Reformed Church here
in Amsterdam and renew and refresh us we pray.
And Lord Jesus, bless those in particular need of prayer this day
as in a moment we hold them in silence before you...
Am we pray all these things in your name,
The name of the risen and ascended Lord of all. Amen.