

## Year C Ascension Day

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1: 15-23

Luke 24: 44-53

What picture do you have in your mind about the Ascension? Speaking for myself, I have never found one that seems realistic. If you look on the Internet, most of them are heavily stylized. In one sense, fair enough because obviously and we have no idea no-one who has painted it was there, and in any event the Gospel writers can't agree on the details.

Mark places it on Easter Day and in the presence of the 11 in Jerusalem, Matthew says it takes place on a mountain in Galilee in front of the 11, while Luke says it happened near Bethany in the presence of the 11 'and those with them, and that also appears to have happened on Easter Day, although in Acts he says it happened 40 days later. John being John doesn't mention it all but makes clear it must have happened after his encounter with Peter on the beach in Galilee.

Some of the paintings are, to be honest pretty awful. Some I have seen show a pair of feet, sometimes with nail marks, sometimes not, and legs up to the knees, with the rest of the body hidden by pale cloud just a few feet above a bunch of elderly men with white beards gazing upwards.

Given Jesus' disciples were, as far as we know, his sort of age, it seems faintly silly. Actually William Barclay, the great Scottish theologian, was much ruder. He said that no artist had succeeded in painting a picture of the Ascension that was anything but grotesque and ridiculous. And that includes some great artists.

What I would like to do this evening is to look at the Ascension from a very different artistic perspective, and I am indebted to Debbie Lewer, an academic art historian at Glasgow University. First of all, I should say that the picture, which you should all have a copy of, was never intended to be about the Ascension. Next, apart from Markie, does anyone recognise this piece of art and know who created it?

For those of you who don't know, it was created just over 30 years ago by the British artist Cornelia Parker. It is called *Cold, Dark Matter: An Exploded View*. She created it by gathering a whole array of everyday objects into a garden shed, and then, at her request, the British Army, blew the whole thing up with dynamite and what you see in the photograph are the results of the explosion – the various fragments are in suspended animation with a single light inside. The shed is no longer earthbound, it's taken on a new form and the light shines through the darkness. I'm sure I don't have to make the connection for you.

Take a manual for a car engine or the assembly instructions for an Ikea piece of furniture, or even look closely at a mobile phone. Seeing it as whole, we don't necessarily understand how it all fits together, but break it down into its constituent parts and they can become marvels of design. The exploded view Parker talks about obviously takes things apart but also provides new insight.

And I think this concept applies to the disciples at the time of the Ascension. Their life had been blown to smithereens first at the crucifixion, then been put back together in some semblance of order, and now smashed to pieces again 40 days later as Jesus leaves them for good, leaving them to make a fresh start without their friend and mentor.

Endings and beginnings. Luke ends his Gospel with the Ascension, the end of Jesus' relatively short time on earth. And he starts The Acts of the Apostles with the Ascension, which in turn leads to the birth of the Church.

An ending and a beginning. A metaphor for the whole of life really. You leave school and hopefully move into more education or a job. Relationships, children, changing jobs, moving house, retiring, widowhood, death. They all involve endings and beginnings in one way or another. And so it is on our journey with Jesus. The old has gone, the new has come.

And so it was for the disciples. They were left wondering exactly what the crucifixion, the resurrection and now the idea of Jesus being one with God in all eternity meant. All their ideas about what the Messiah represented were in bits and pieces, like Cornelia Parker's shed. But with Jesus' departing blessings in their ears, they were charged with making a new beginning from all the fragments, helped of course by the imparting of the Holy Spirit in 10 days' time at Pentecost. And waiting is part of beginnings. Most of us don't rush into starting things without first waiting and thinking and planning. Did all that happened between the Cross and the Ascension, the time that elapsed give the disciples time for reflection, time to gain insight into how a whole new world was opening up in front of them?

Who knows whether we will receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation as the hearts of our eyes are opened as Paul puts it in our Ephesians reading. But when so much that is familiar has been shattered over the past two years, first by the pandemic and now by war on our doorstep in Europe, perhaps this Ascension will help us to think beyond our normal boundaries and the images we hold in our minds. With so much of what we have come to think of as being normal having been blown apart, perhaps we can use this time to see and ponder on how God is undoing and redoing creation all the time.

Because what I think the Ascension does above all is point to a new reality, a new beginning. By first his death and then his resurrection, Jesus has shown that might is not always right. His choice of Bethany for his Ascension was deliberate. Apart from being the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Bethany was also the place where the poor

and sick were sent out of sight of the Temple and the people of Jerusalem, and that is where Jesus chose to spend his last moments on earth

What do we need to take a new view of, which parts of our entrenched thinking need dynamite taking to them? Should we be looking up to heaven as the disciples were, in an attempt to see God? Not according to the men in white, because that would be a waste of our time. Don't just stand there, go and do what you have been told to do is their message. Don't hanker for what has been and don't fantasise about what may happen in the future. The disciples were called to live in the present, because they had suddenly catapulted, albeit against their will, to be leaders rather than the followers they had been for the previous three years. A new beginning for them as well as an ending.

If that was the case for the disciples, then what about us? The same strictures and the same commands apply just as much to us today as it did to them. We are not to be afraid of endings or shy away from new beginnings. And if that is the case then you and I should perhaps be looking for those shafts of light illuminating the darkness to see how things can be made new.