

Ascension reflection 16/5/21

Acts 1:1-14 NIV

Ephesians 1:15-23 NLT

“Because” by Grace Schulman

When I hear the story of the Ascension, I think automatically of the Altar Mosaic at St Paul’s Anglican Cathedral. Perhaps you have had a look at it yourselves? It shows a glowing Jesus rising up from flares of light. It’s made of furnishing fabric and applique with machine embroidery, and was designed and made by Beverly Shore Bennet. For those of you who are creative, and like to know these things, there are nearly 5000 pieces in the central panel and it is 8.8 meters high and 4.5 m wide. A lot of work went into it!

Sometimes when I’ve been at a concert at the cathedral I’ve gazed at that Mosaic and tried to connect with it, to find some sort of meaning in that image- and failed. The Ascension and this Transcendent Christ seem to be a bit beyond my experience. As I pondered the Bible readings for today I wondered about that, and how it might be possible to understand the Ascension more fully. What can we lay claim to from this image that may empower us in living our lives to the full today?

Spiritual writer and speaker, Margaret Silf speaks of imagination as bridging “that gap between what we perceive with our senses and the reality far greater than our rational minds”. Let’s see if we can think and feel ourselves imaginatively into a connection with that greater reality in the narrative of the Ascension.

Setting the immediate events of the Ascension in a larger context, we can discern a sense of overall flow in the salvation history of the New Testament. We see the love of God become embodied as a baby, express itself in the preaching, teaching, healing and dying of the man Jesus. It becomes transformed in the Resurrection Jesus and changes again, after the Ascension into the Cosmic Christ. After Pentecost that power of love is channelled through the Apostles and the Early Church. We too are a part of that tradition, expressing the life of Jesus in our world today.

I have some sympathy for the disciples of Jesus, trying to keep up with this process. They often seemed to get hold of the wrong end of the stick. They were only just recognising who Jesus was for them as a person, when the events of Easter week overwhelmed them. Then the shock of the Resurrection happened and now Jesus leaves them again, but more completely. No wonder they are left standing with their mouths hanging open gazing up into the sky!

The somewhat bare description of the Ascension in Acts which Valerie read to us today, is explored further in other parts of the New Testament. The second reading, from the Letter to the Ephesians, gives a taste of how that theme is developed. The writer uses imagery from the Psalms (Windtles and Gnanakan 2006) to describe a powerful, elevated Christ very different from the earthly Jesus seen in the gospels. We can also see the growing effect of that power on the early believers.

However, the sparser reading of Acts does offer us some initial insights into this event.

In that reading we see the Risen Jesus doing many of the same sort of things he did previously. He spends time with the disciples, eats with them, teaches them, gives instructions, and answers questions. The disciples in their turn gather round him, ask questions, ponder his replies and watch in awe. Much as before! The relationship between them is shown continuing beyond Jesus' death and resurrection.

When Jesus is "taken up", they appear stunned with wonder and move into a time of expectant waiting. It is an in between time, a liminal time. These times can be hard and it can be tempting to rush ahead into action. But underneath the surface stillness, there can be a lot going on. This liminal time is a time of possibility and potential, of not knowing, and yet trusting for the disciples.

Perhaps that ability to trust came from all the previous experiences they had had of having their expectations enlarged and their awareness expanded in their time with Jesus. The continuity of their previous relationship with Jesus supports them as they wait.

Importantly, this in between time is not spent alone but with the others in their community, including the women and Mary, Jesus' mother and Jesus' brothers. And the time is spent praying together, staying connected with each other with, and the God they saw embodied in Jesus.

Looking further on in the book of Acts we can see that the disciples themselves begin doing the sort of things Jesus did, preaching, teaching and healing. The power moving in Jesus flows out and expresses itself in their actions.

The Ascension is one of the key events in the process that allows this to happen. Biblical scholar Craig Blomberg (Blomberg, 2006) suggests that the Ascension marks the completion of one part of this process and the beginning of another at Pentecost. Jesus had to leave in order that he might be present in a different way, with and through the early believers.

I can make the imaginative leap to understand, in a more mundane way, how this process could happen. Drawing on events in my own life, I can connect with those ancient ones described in Acts. I know that since my Mum died a couple of years ago my sister Morag and I have each taken on aspects of her role for us. We keep in touch and look out for each other a bit more. We sometimes say the same things Mum would've said to us, to each other (usually with a laugh). And if I hear a piece of music I think Morag might find useful for her choir to sing, I send it to her, as Mum sometimes did for us. Then we feel her close at hand.

The book of Acts describes mainly external actions of the early believers, credited to the power of the Spirit. The reading from the letter to the Ephesians shows some of the attributes growing within the lives and personalities of the believers, as a result of that power. If you were listening attentively, you might have noticed the fundamental qualities of faith, hope and love which were specifically mentioned. There is also a prayer that the believers become enlightened and develop wisdom and understanding.

The development of these characteristics is directly related to the "same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand". The attributes described in the early believers appeals to me. But I feel more ambivalent about the words and imagery of enthronement and elevation used to describe the power behind them. This God seems far away and rather authoritarian.

Commentator, Francis Foulkes's thoughts on these words (Foulkes, 1989) allow me to reframe this somewhat. He notes the many words used in to describe this 'power", one of which is "energy". This is a word I can relate to more positively. I feel that this energy may indeed be present within me and others in a life enhancing way. He also notes the fact that this power or energy is described as being "for us" as well as "in us". Very reassuring!

Gathering these reflections together, I ask myself, "What metaphor or image might help us connect to the "reality" behind the story of the Ascension?". What words of imagination will bridge the gap between our world and that "greater Reality"?

Here's a couple of ideas that work for me..... You will no doubt have your own.

Being an enthusiastic member of a local yoga class and aware also of the image of the "breath" of the Spirit in our own tradition.....

I wonder if the Ascension has something of the quality of a gasp of awe, before the breathing out of the spirit into the disciples at Pentecost?

(Demonstrate)

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Taking that a step further..... Perhaps that intake of breath followed by a sustained breathing out is like playing a wind instrument or singing? Music offered up to the listeners, healing both player and listener and bringing meaning and joy.

Some of my moments of feeling connected to a reality greater than me have been musical..... singing the Messiah at the Town Hall, playing flute in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony., so these images work for me.

I believe that these moments are moments of pure grace, which bring joy and sustain us all. They strengthen us in the difficulties of our lives and enable us to reach out in compassion to others.

But I believe also that those moments of connection and empowerment must also be grounded in the reality of our everyday lives. Recalling the Book of Acts and the New Testament letters, it is obvious that the early church had many struggles. The imagery of Jesus enthroned at God's right hand above all powers sustained them in their difficulties.

We too have our struggles but the imagery that conveys that power, still available for us today may be different.

The poem by Grace Schulman which was our contemporary reading portrays a life-giving energy greater than us, but present with us, in the complexities of our daily life.

"Because in a smoky bar the trombone blares
louder than the street sirens, because those
who can no longer speak of pain are singing....

Because I cannot lose the injured world

Without losing the world, I'll have to praise it"

The poem holds together the good AND the bad, the grit AND the glory. It is a truth also found in our tradition, which acknowledges the reality of the cross as well as the life giving energy and joy of the Resurrection and Ascension.

Music that emerges from this place where pain and pleasure struggle together, gains depth and richness. And the energy of that sound reaches out to touch and bless and heal an "injured world".

Hearing that poignant melody, we are drawn in, our feet start tapping, our bodies sway and we begin to hum along with the tune.

So then, let us join the music.....

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