

Ascension '11
Twente

Acts 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53

Up, up and away (and yet)

I don't know where the expression comes from. I do know there was a Superman comic book series with the title. And it was also the name of a mellow late-1960s hit by a band called the 5th Dimension – about a beautiful balloon. According to one source, this song is 'the canonical example of sunshine pop.' That sounds mildly disturbing!

The expression I am thinking of, that has very much entered the English language is 'up, up, and away.'

And, for many, the expression 'up, up and away' might be a concise description of how they understand the Ascension of Christ. I would suggest it is not an altogether trivial summary of the event, but it needs qualification. This sermon is titled 'Up, up and away (and yet).'

The Ascension is absolutely no trivial matter, even though, for us moderns, it seems quite odd and far-fetched. Ascension is one of the 11 High Holy Days in the Church of England's ancient tradition, and it has become a public holiday in many countries because it is so important.

The reason why 'up, up and away' is a fair summary of the Ascension is that:

1. The Ascension points back to the first and greatest rising of Christ – the resurrection at Easter, which is the most important moment of all: the conquering of sin and death and the victory of our Saviour over the forces of evil once and for all time. We owe our life, life in abundance and eternal life to Christ. His first rising lifts us up too.

2. The Ascension itself raises Christ, in a theological sense, a second and final time, up to where the Lord of the Universe belongs, to be with God the Father, reigning over all things created. Unfortunately, down through the centuries, many artists have tended to render St Luke's florid description of the Ascension a bit little too dramatically. So we have things like Albrecht Dürer's famous print, with the awed faces of the disciples staring up as they see the feet of Christ launching into heaven on a cloud (though Luke in Acts says he disappeared IN a cloud, not on one). There's a delightful detail: you see Christ's footprints still there on the Mount of Olives, just before he took off! As art critic Neill MacGregor points out, 'The print's meaning is profound, but the image to modern eyes cannot help seeming absurd, as Christ vanishes from sight like a self-propelled missile.' It is a shame, in a way, because though such images are memorable, they focus us too much on the technical, physical aspects and cause us to ignore the spiritual and even political point. Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, has returned to the Father. Unlike all the Roman Emperors, who claimed to have divine connections, Jesus, through his Ascension, is shown to be Lord and King of All, and finally and indisputably one with the Father.
3. If the 1st up is the Easter Resurrection and the 2nd one is the Ascension we celebrate today, then there is this one final aspect: away. One thing that we and the 1st disciples had to accept is that Ascension also meant the end of Jesus' physical life among us on earth. The disciples were at first dumbfounded and distressed at this. And many of us later have yearned nostalgically for the days when Jesus walked the earth as one of us. But as Archbishop William Temple helpfully pointed out years ago, the Ascension does mean that the physical Jesus is away now, but that actually also means that he is no

longer confined to a single human body as he was in his Incarnation in Palestine in the 1st Century. Temple wrote: 'In his earthly ministry, Jesus could only be in one place at a time, but now he is united with God, he is present wherever God is present (by the Spirit); and that is everywhere.' Ascended, he is now everywhere with us by the Spirit.

So the Ascension opens the gate to Pentecost, as it were, and the pouring out of the Spirit on all creation and especially on all who believe, the Church of Christ. The Ascension confirms that Jesus is the Head of the Church, and Pentecost confirms us as part of the His Body.

That's all big stuff to take in on a lovely day just before a picnic, but it is the reason why we are here today, in more ways than one. And for the Ascension we give thanks.

It is important to know that the Ascension matters because it marks, in a way, an end and a beginning. An end of Jesus earthly ministry as a man sent by God, but the beginning of the New Age of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was asked by a disciple before he left 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.' This is often taken to mean 'No, I am not now restoring the Kingdom,' but that is not correct (as NT Wright has pointed out). Jesus' words were a warning against fixating on the when and how of the Kingdom come (which has exercised the minds of medieval mystics and modern (American) pastors too). Jesus is simply saying – the timing is under the Father's control, but he then says: ⁸'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' This provides the

program for the rest of the Book of Acts and for the rest of Christian history. We are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And He sends his Spirit to guide us, to encourage us, to empower us. In his wonderful opening to his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes: ¹⁷'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, [Finishing catechism or Sunday School or being confirmed does not mean an end to learning about God in the Spirit anymore than getting a diploma means we can stop learning afterwards. We are to grow, day by day.] ¹⁸So that, [Paul writes] with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.'

This is the Age we live in: the Age of the Spirit, where the King does reign over all and where Kingdom has come into our hearts and, we pray, is to come more in more, with our help and God's guiding, into our needy world.

Jesus is ascended. He is 'up' in some sense with God, but he who promised he would never abandon his own, is not 'away' except in a physical sense. His Spirit is with us, and so we live in Him, and He in us, for ever. Amen.