

Homily for Ascension Day 21 May 2020

Ascension day is the day on which modern day realists have a field day. Acts and Luke, in which the story appears, have the nearest thing to a Cape Canaveral lift off except that it's hundreds of years too early. People have been kept busy for centuries working out the physics and metaphysics of bodily ascension into the clouds of heaven and whether or not Jesus could flout the laws of space and time.

But there is a wide consensus in the New Testament preaching that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father, although it is Luke alone who presents this clearly in narrative form. And, it is this stress on bodily details which makes the ascension so difficult to preach, because the historicity may be questioned. Because of this we have to give ourselves permission not to worry too much about the literal dynamics, but to look at the meaning and intention of it.

Iwonder if any of you watch World Championship Snooker. If you do, you will know that Mark Williams is an excellent player. One day he reached the final. He had one follower who put a large bet on him to win. This follower had seen Mark playing when he was 9 years old. He had been so impressed that he went out to place a bet on him winning the world championship, before or in the year 2000. He got odds of 300 to 7 so he would win £42,000 if Mark won. But unfortunately he lost. The point of this story is that the man had seen Williams' potential. And that is how the story of the ascension strikes us. We are made in the image of God and have the potential to be lifted up. So the meaning and intention of the story of the ascension is that it shows us the unity of the human and divine. The potential of all humanity is to become divine. The importance then is not just that something happened to Jesus, but that it was a demonstration of how we *all* can be lifted up.

The ascension also deals with a validation process, the validation of the work of Christ. The ascension is the sealing and perfecting of the renewal of human nature by Christ. Against the catastrophe of evil and sin there is the possibility of a life of grace. There is a happy ending, a supernatural existence, or what the 4th gospel calls eternal life. The work of Christ makes it possible that human beings for whom Christ died might be caught in the glory of God's fulfilled creation. Now we can be part of the kind of thing that can happen when human nature has reached its true end.

Jesus' departure is not just the conclusion of a sequence of resurrection appearances. It is, as Matthew's gospel shows, the first movement in the creation of a world wide mission and witness by the church in the power of the promised Spirit.

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