

Sermon 16.05.21 Ascension Sunday

I think it's fair to say that almost every piece of art work we could look at from across the centuries depicts Christ's ascension in fairly similar ways and these tend to be based on a literal depiction of the words from the Acts of the Apostles which we heard read at the beginning of today's service. That written extract culminates in Christ being somehow drawn or taken upwards in a cloud, up into the sky, and he is usually then depicted hovering with bare feet just above the heads of the onlookers, who point up towards what's happening. I've always found this event of the ascension quite difficult to fathom out: did it or did it not really happen in such a literal physical way?

Over time I've reached a place where that is far less important to me - that is how it actually happened, or what exactly took place, and instead looked at what it symbolises and what it might mean for today, for now.

For Ascensontide this year then, I've turned to an ancient painting of the story from the something called the Rabbula Gospels. These Gospels were around in the 6th century in Syria, and the scribe was called Rabbula - about which we know just about nothing! There are several small paintings or 'miniatures' which accompany the writing, and we're going to look at one of them now...



So this painting is called 'Christ's Ascension'. And true to form we notice the obvious things straight away - Christ hovering in a semi-circle of white depicting the cloud, and the 11 disciples watching and pointing with a mixture of facial expressions. Let's take a closer look at a few of the details:

Directly beneath Christ's bare feet is a rather obscure orange image - with four large angel wings stretching out in different directions, wheels either side, and the faces of four creatures: a depiction of Ezekiel's narrative of his vision of Christ: Ezekiel wrote: *'as I looked, a stormy wind came from the north...in the midst, something like gleaming amber. And in the middle, something like four living creatures - one a human being, one a lion, one an ox and the other an eagle.'*

Their wings were spread out above; the fire was bright; there were wheels at the side. Above them all, something in human form....this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord'. Here, then, in the Rabbula miniature, is an image of Ezekiel's vision which helps us to recall how the glory of God can be present and revealed. Ezekiel also reminds us of the 'cloud with great brightness around it' and this in turn reminds us of several other 'clouds' in scripture where the glory of God is present. Where the cloud is, there is God. So we recall the daytime pillar of cloud guiding the Israelites out from Egypt; the cloud on Mount Sinai in which God descended to meet Moses;

the cloud of God's presence in the Tent of meeting; and at Christ's Transfiguration God spoke from within the cloud. Where the cloud is, God glory is also - God is present, God is near, God speaks. The Ascension then, is a place where God both meets us in the cloud - hence the incredulity and amazement and no doubt confusion for the disciples - and draws his son into himself, into His glory. The physical, tangible, human form of Jesus is re-united with the Father. The cloud is part of the mystery of how this happens: we cannot see or touch or fully know God and the cloud enables us to come closer. Today, incense is a fantastic tangible reminder of the transcendent God in the cloud, whom we cannot fully encounter in this world, but have only known through the incarnate Christ.

The entire salvation story is shrouded in a cloud of not fully knowing or understanding, and a cloud of mystery - but where the cloud is there is God. There are also clouds all around us if we care to look not just to the sky but elsewhere too.

The Angels either side of Christ in the picture are offering him crowns, reminding us of Christ as King. The tiny figurines in the top two corners so the picture - one sun, the other moon, remind us of creation - day and night - and the wind whirls around above the greens and blues of the earth and the sea below. These images recall the Spirit hovering about, and her part in the created order, and remind us of Christ's presence within the Trinity - pre-existent but present at creation with the Spirit, and now drawn back into the Father's presence.

These connections within this picture remind us both of the eternal nature of God - and the ultimate consummation of the world with God - who's timeframe and points of reference are so very different and so alien to our own understanding: as Luke has reminded us - 'it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority'. This picture points us towards a sense of completeness and wholeness.

Mary Mother of God almost takes centre stage. Look at her posture: open arms in both praise and invitation, asking us to take our part in the story. Her face suggests she still ponders: ⁽¹⁾pondering what is happening, what has happened, and questioning perhaps what may happen next. Her son, come into the world, died and gone, come back again in resurrected form, and now is going yet gain. Will He come back once more? What will happen next?

Mary in this picture I think invites us to ponder with her amidst the confusion and the unknowing - to may be sit or stand in cloudiness alongside her, questioning and reflecting.

The picture also points us forward to Pentecost: we can see flames of fire, like tongues, here heading down towards the disciples: the Spirit is active and at work - integral to the Trinitarian whole and free to minister. Little could the disciples have known what was soon to happen just some 10 days or so after this extraordinary event! Even though they'd only just been told that the Holy Spirit would come, they surely couldn't have understood much at that point in this chain of events.

We don't have time this morning to try to fathom out which disciple is which in the picture but we note Judas' absence, and Peter is easy to spot in the right side of the picture. But their collective body language is what I want us to reflect on to

end today. The disciples are mostly pointing upwards and our gaze, together with theirs, is naturally directed in this picture towards the ascending Christ. This may present us with a challenge. Our human nature causes us so often to point instead towards each other, to point towards another human being, so often in an attempt to tell someone that something is their responsibility, or to point in blame, or to deflect something away from ourselves by conjuring up something which may not even be fully true.

This picture reminds us of the importance of pointing towards Christ, the Truth, not just with our own demeanour, but also to encourage others to do likewise - to turn away from blame and criticism, and to seek Christs' love and truth in all things. In baptism, we 'turn to Christ' - sometimes helpfully actually physically enacting this within our baptism services, physically turning around our body to face the cross.

The Ascension event then, albeit with all of its slightly bizarre imagery and perhaps stretching our imaginations to the ultimate, can be seen as an invitation: in the Rabbula Gospel picture Mary invites us in, to ponder with her the mysteries of salvation.

The disciples also invite us with them to point to Christ, and to invite others to do likewise. Rather than dwelling then on how this event actually happened, we can understand the Ascension as a call to conversion ⁽²⁾ - to re-orientate ourselves to gaze on Christ and to look beyond the tangible difficulties of this world. Amen.

(1) (2) *Varden The Tablet 25 May 2019*