



## Tissington Well Blessing - Ascension Day

26 May 2022

readings: [Acts of the Apostles 1 verses 1-11](#), [St Mark 16 verses 9-19](#)

Visiting London, some will have been up the Shard or the so-called Walkie Talkie building. You will remember the lifts. Ground to the 37<sup>th</sup> floor in a matter of moments without even noticing!

If you have come on Ascension Day with an image of the Ascension of the risen Jesus as a celestial elevator experience removing our Lord from one level of the cosmos to another then I am, in part, at least, going to disappoint you.

On Ascension Day we are presented with the final mystery of Jesus' earthly life. The invitation is to notice the language that St Luke and St Mark use to communicate what must have been an event both remarkable and mysterious. Jesus was 'lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight' – St Luke's words: 'He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God' – St Mark's words.

Jesus did not go 'down' to heaven, nor move sideways to take his exit but he went 'up' and the direction is important because we hear the two evangelists reaching for language to describe the indescribable. And notice how we use the ordinary language of 'up' everyday.

We say – 'I feel uplifted today'. We shout up the stairs in the morning – 'wake up', unless of course 'she rises early'. We talk about the spirit of a village or a town 'being lifted' when there is a key event. On a good day, we say about our son: 'he is on top of the world', when he is fully in control and enjoying it. 'She's at the peak of her career', we say proudly of our daughter, or she has moved 'up' to the next form at school. We can be 'high' minded, have 'high' standards. We can 'rise above the fray', making sense of the whole. In our worship, 'we lift up our hearts.'

The language of 'up' is our attempt to show how the Ascension is a happy ending to the Easter story. It ends on an 'upbeat' note we might say. The language of 'up' is about wellbeing and fulfilment and happiness; its about status and abundance; its about awareness and consciousness; its about approval and affirmation; its living a life of virtue that makes a difference; its about getting on and about human flourishing.

Resurrection life might be very good, but Ascension life is even better; its even better if; its very good indeed and the only suitable language to get hold of its impact is the language of 'up' – the language of well-being and flourishing.

You get the point, I hope. In the Ascension there is a completeness to the life and obedience, suffering and death of our Saviour; Jesus quite literally has been to hell and back for us. Ascension means that victory over human wickedness and self-centredness is irreversibly complete – death in every respect has lost its sting. The Ascension means that Christians can tell the story of humanity transformed now living at the very heart of God's being in heaven. Ascension means that human beings have a stake in heaven, a place waiting for us alongside the saints and angels in eternity.

Heaven is an embodied place and if your head like mine is hurting now then be re-assured you are not the only one! Heaven and earth are not what they can seem at first glance - the physical on the one hand and the spiritual on the other, because the risen and ascended body of Jesus is now in heaven. The new

creation has begun. We need to think differently – heaven and earth – two different spaces, times, and types of matter. Some what inadequately, the best I can do is point you to C S Lewis and the Narnia books that describe a different world and its relationship to this one. We can never say that the Christian faith doesn't stretch our minds!

But what matters much more is what difference the Ascension makes to us, to the church and to the brokenness of our fractured world – a world at war, a world facing climate emergency, a world of deepening inequality? What does an Ascension-shaped perspective mean for us?

It means life in all its fulness. One of the strange things about St Luke is that he gives us two accounts of the Ascension – the one we have just read and another at the very end of his Gospel, in which the very final thing the risen Jesus does is to bless his disciples and as he blesses them, he departs.

His farewell gift is not a pat on the back or good wishes for the future but a blessing. Its the gift of life. Blessing passes on life. It transfers something. That is why we will bless the wells in a few minutes because in all the creativity of the flowers and in the designs – we want them to pass on the joy of life to all who visit and beyond. In the Ascension, as for the disciples, so God transfers new life to us, life in all its abundance and that is why its only the language of 'up' that can unfold the mystery of what happened forty days after Easter.

And life means energy. If we were to read a few verses on from where the Acts of Apostles' reading finished, then we hear how the disciples headed back from Mount Olivet where the Ascension took place into Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem they awaited the promised Spirit. At Pentecost they were filled with joy. Every day they gathered at the Temple in prayer.

It sounds as though they were doing the right things at such a time of transformation, but we need to appreciate that in Jewish theology Jerusalem and the Temple were the very centre of the world.

The disciples no longer looked up to heaven to make sense of their experience, but they headed to the centre of things. The Ascension gives us confidence and energy because of the completed work of Jesus. The Ascension calls the church to head for the centre of things. As churches we are to get involved in what is happening in our communities, supporting the weak and the vulnerable, being alongside the sick, taking an interest in rural affairs and all the challenges of the countryside. That is where we find God at work – at the centre of things - and like the first disciples we are called to head towards what God is doing and join in.

An Ascension-shaped view helps us see that the absence of Jesus from this earth means his presence both in heaven and on earth through the power of the Spirit. It helps us to see Jesus not only as our high priest presenting in every moment our humanity and his prayers for us before our heavenly father, but also as King of the whole cosmos, recreating all space, time, and matter.

Malcolm Guite, the outstanding Anglican poet of our generation, has a poem about the Ascension that captures the role of the ascended Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

We saw his light break through the cloud of glory  
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place  
As earth became a part of Heaven's story  
And heaven opened to his human face.  
We saw him go and yet we were not parted  
He took us with him to the heart of things  
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted  
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,  
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,

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<sup>1</sup> From his book *Sounding the Seasons* (2012)

Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,  
Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness  
And sing the waning darkness into light,  
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,  
Which all creation waits to see revealed.

The heart that was broken is yet now whole, and sings. The heart that has taken the broken-hearted into the centre of God's life sings. Singing – and we will be doing a great deal of it in the next hour or so as we bless the Tissington wells - is a way of describing the work of the ascended Jesus in heaven.

At the Ascension, God's work is finished in terms of Jesus' earthly life, death, and resurrection but it continues unfinished both in heaven and in our lives and our hearts here on earth. We live the mixture of good and bad in our lives, yet an Ascension-shaped perspective always sees the realities we face in the light of what is yet to come.

We live with the provisional, the unfinished and the uncomfortable; but we have the security of God who holds in Christ the future of all humanity safe in his hands and in his very being, showing us that because our humanity is united with our God in heaven, that each one of us is precious beyond measure to God, that the evils of this world have already received their judgement, that God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth has decisively begun, and our future with God for eternity awaits us.

As the poet says, the risen and ascended Jesus returns to his home in heaven and begins to sing in 'the strength that rises out of weakness' – notice the up language! – and there is the invitation to join in. The invitation 'to sing the waning darkness into light' and play our part in God's mission in the world, the transformation of the human heart. Amen

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