

Sermon preached at St James's on Ascension Day, 5 May 2016

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Luke 24.44-53

## We're subject to gravity and grace

The Christian *Feast of the Ascension* marks the end of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The Party Line is that it describes his movement from the earthly to the heavenly realm.

We have just heard the accounts from *Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles*. The Church tends to make it a celebration of his glory and power but what we get from these readings is a suggestion that what is really important here is the claim that something significant is soon to happen. In both accounts the disciples are told to remain in the City and await something radical which is to be delivered to them by the Holy Spirit. The actual 'ascension' is dealt with in both readings in a rather straight-forward, even incidental, way.

It's a strange Feast and a strange story. In a chapel in Walsingham - named after this very feast - there is a moulded three dimensional representation which is affixed to the ceiling above the altar. Forming a circular perimeter is a cloud, and emerging from it are two dangling feet. If like me you sometimes get tired of impressionistic artwork this is a tonic. It is gloriously unambiguous. Unambiguous that is except for its vertical movement. Are the feet going up or coming down? It's hard to tell.

Not very long ago I was visiting with a surveyor a property that had some building work taking place. Despite a hard hat and a hi-vis jacket and the unmistakable demeanour of a man who knows what he is doing I managed to overlook a hole in the floor. It was big enough to swallow my legs but not my waist. The appearance of my dangling legs through the ceiling below caused first surprise then amusement for the workmen in the basement. Curiously not one of them suggested a parallel with the Ascension, though of course I was travelling in the wrong direction. A common human experience, you might say.

Whoever carved the Walsingham representation had fun. It sums up a pairing I have always enjoyed contemplating: that of gravity and of grace. Christians talk a lot about grace, and rather imprecisely don't you think? But whatever we mean by it, it has that hint of weightlessness, of being borne aloft, of ascending beyond our all-too-well-known limits.

But you and I also have gravity to deal with. Not just the sort described by Einstein, the sort that has made life on earth possible. Sometimes our spirits are pulled down too, by forces we may not see or even imagine but whose power is felt in negative ways. Pulled down too by our past experiences, by our current interpretations, by loss and loneliness and the periodic lunacy most of us experience from time to time.

We are unlikely to escape this kind of unhelpful gravity in any significant sense until we escape it through the portal of death. But that does not mean we are spared the challenge – whilst in this life – of seeking to improve our aerodynamics as best we can: to (- if this is not getting carried away with metaphors-) to learn to ride the thermals of both *gravity and grace*. A certain skill akin to hang-gliding has its place in the interior life.

I can't speak for you, but what strikes me most about this short business we call 'life' is that it is best approached in the spirit of exploration. I don't manage it all the time, by any means, but I'm glad when I do. It's a marvellous thing to keep alive in each of us that child-like quality of interested curiosity. I don't mean in the narrow academic sense of exams and awards; I mean in the far more important business of wanting to learn more about what life is and how we are to live it for our own and other's greatest good and happiness and (to use that other tricky religious

term) to God's *glory*. The best kind of curiosity has wings.

Of course, there are so many things which prevent us from exploring with the thirst and interest which we often see in children. It is worth doing all we can to recover that openness and excitement – even if only periodically.

The gravity I mentioned as the force which sometimes prevents our 'ascension' has two dimensions for we Explorers: dimensions of both physics and *metaphysics*. Physical gravity we cannot escape except aided by planes or hot-air balloons or the long-promised personal jet pack (Tomorrow's World has a lot to answer for). But we can occasionally escape another kind of gravity – the attitudes, worries, habits and preoccupations that weigh us down and keep us earth-bound.

So what are the bags of ballast that keep *you* pressed down and unable to ascend by riding the thermals of God's good grace? Are they to do with fear perhaps, or guilt? Or have you sustained some hurt or harm that has wounded you so much that you find it hard to pull yourself up a little? These are important matters. If unresolved they keep us earth-bound in the worst sense. They prevent us from entering into the joyful, exploring curiosity of God and living with a lightness of attachment of which Christ's Ascension gives us a foretaste. It's worth doing all we can to understand those ballast-bags pinning us down, and finding ways to cut them loose.

"Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ...and they returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*; and they were continually in the temple blessing God". Amen.

Hugh Valentine