



gravity and grace

“*He ascended into heaven*”. It’s what we say in the Creed. And today is Ascension Day - or more properly, The Feast of the Ascension of Christ.

It commemorates the “taking up” of Christ into Heaven as recorded in Mark, Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. The event marks the end of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances and is understood as a conclusion, bringing into frame two paradoxical images: the mocked, crucified Jesus and the risen, ascended Christ.

It is a rather strange Feast and a pretty strange story. The writers, of course, lived in pre-Copernican times. The world was flat. Above was heaven, below was Hades. In the middle was the earth. A three story residence in which the drama of life was enacted. Understanding this helps us get beyond the flavour of Jesus taking the lift to the top floor: an image that brings to my mind the cathedral ceiling boss, high up in the roof, showing only the soles of a pair of feet.

But the ascension accounts in the New Testament are surely not about *altitude* but transition. And heaven, in the Christian sense, is not a place miles above but a dimension of reality which intersects with our own.

But the *altitude* link persists. Let me point you to ascensionflights.com whose strap line is *Scatter your loved one’s ashes in space*. They are based in Sheffield and offer two packages. *Serenity Launch* carries the ashes inside a balloon which scatters them at 100,000 feet; *Memorial Launch* includes a video camera attached to the balloon which films the ashes being dispersed against the curved outline of our planet and made to sparkle by the sun. The resulting DVD can include a musical soundtrack of your choice.

Any sniffiness I felt on first discovering this service soon evaporated. I can see its appeal. We need all the help we can get in navigating grief. And for those planning what happens to their

remains, it may offer a gravity-defying flourish after a life time of earth-bound toil.

The Ascension is presented as, amongst other things, a gravity-defying event. For years I have been interested in the juxtaposition of gravity and 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 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 heavy ways. Pulled down too by our past experiences, by our current interpretations, by loss and loneliness and the periodic lunacy our species exhibits.

In fact, the latter seems especially disorientating just now. Not only here in the UK over our identity as four nations and our relationship to the rest of Europe, but also globally. What on Earth is happening in the world? And institutions we may not have loved but at least had some residual trust in begin to appear weak, broken or corrupt. This collective sense of being weighed down seems tangible. We should take it seriously; and resist it seriously.

We are unlikely to escape the tension between gravity and grace in any in any full sense until we escape it through the portal of death. But that does not mean we are spared the challenge (let’s even say duty), 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 skill akin to hang-gliding has its place in the interior life, and indeed for just getting by.

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 quality of interested curiosity. I don't mean in any narrow academic sense; 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. By it we ascend. By it we transcend.

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.

Here are some questions by which we might best use this feast of Christ's Ascension.

What are the bags of ballast that keep you pressed down and unable to ascend by riding the thermals of God's grace? Are they to do with fear perhaps, or guilt, or ambition, or addiction?

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 curiosity of God and from living with a lightness of attachment of which Christ's Ascension gives us a hint. We should not lose time in facing these things in our lives, for we know not the hour when it may be our turn to rise on the tail of a helium balloon over South Yorkshire, to be dispersed as star dust.

It is a duty of care we each owe ourselves to do all we can to understand those ballast-bags pinning us down, and finding ways to cut them loose before that final take-off.

"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" [Today's Gospel]. Amen.

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