

## Ascension Day 16<sup>th</sup> May 2015 Beverley Minster

It is about 30 years ago that I started doing Thought for the Day on Radio 4. Our eldest daughter was about two years old. She came into our bedroom one morning just as I began speaking out of the radio. She was instantly puzzled. She could hear my voice but couldn't see me. She looked under the duvet, in the wardrobe and under the bed as if I was playing a game of 'Hide and Seek'. She simply couldn't understand what was going on. She couldn't grasp it. I was there – she could hear my voice, but she couldn't see me – so I wasn't there! So, where was I? Although I wasn't there she could still hear my voice, so I was there after all! All very confusing to her little mind.

Probably just as confusing and as incomprehensible for us when it comes to this episode of Jesus ascending into heaven. For the New Testament holds before us two truths – that Christ has both gone up on high into heaven and is yet still with us here on earth. How can they both be true? It seems to me that before we rush into reducing these truths into the empirical framework of our own limited experience we should clothe ourselves with the humility of a child and accept that however paradoxical these truths may appear the truth about God will more often than not defy our human understanding.

The Ascension of Jesus points us to heaven.

There's a lovely poem by John Donne which he wrote towards the end of his life.

“Since I am coming to that Holy Room where with Thy Choir of Saints forevermore I shall be made Thy music....”.

It speaks to me in two ways. Firstly, the Christian life is a pilgrimage towards the Heavenly City. It is neither morbid nor mawkish to live and to travel consciously in that direction and toward that destiny. The Holy Room is a destination of peace and not fear. And the older we get the more that Room comes into view.

Secondly, we shall be made 'Thy music'. What comes to mind immediately is the scene around the Throne where angels and archangels and all the company of heaven worship the Lord in songs of everlasting praise. But there's more. Our very lives are music to the ears of God and especially our lives redeemed from their sins by Christ. These make for a beautiful symphony in heaven. This is the eternal music in which our Lord delights.

Of course, as people die it is often the fear of the unknown that instils fear in to us. And this is why the Ascension is so important. Although there is so much that we do not know about eternity we are given this picture to comfort and inspire us.

Again, I remember when the children were small taking them on long car journeys from Hull to Scotland. They would struggle to stay awake, but to no avail. We'd arrive in the dark and carry them into their beds. The next morning they'd awake in a burst of joy in their Grandparents' home looking over the shore of the Firth of Forth – from the shore of the Humber to the shore of the Forth. So we struggle to stay awake and for all sorts of good reasons prolong our journey here on earth. But there comes a final sleep that takes us from one shore to another 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life'.

It is in the service of Holy Communion and during the saying or singing of the Sanctus – echoing the song of the angels 'Holy, Holy, Holy' - that we are called to stand at the door of that Holy Room and feel the coming together of earth and heaven for a moment.

When you hear the Choir singing tonight take time to think of those you love who now dwell in that Holy Room; take time to think of that promise Jesus made to us when he said that he has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. Look through the door into that Holy Room and do not fear.

In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' WBYeats poses the question:

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul claps its hands and sings..."

The Ascension of Jesus Christ speaks to the soul, causing it to clap and sing, "Hail the Day that sees him rise. Hallelujah."

The poem of John Donne goes on:

"As I come  
I tune the instrument here at the door,  
And what I must do then, think here before."

So let us tune the instruments of our lives this night, knowing that the One who will greet us in heaven is the same Lord Jesus Christ who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death and takes us into the House of the Lord forever.

Bishop James Jones

