

Out of sight, out of mind?

Ezekiel 36:24-28; Acts 1:6-14

In St Swithin's Church, Walcot, which is I think near Bath, there is a stained glass window depicting the Ascension of Jesus. The disciples are standing around, looking upwards. All you can see of Jesus is the lower half of His body as He rockets off into the heavens – His pierced feet dangling down from the top of the window. It is both comical and disturbing at one and the same time.

How do you paint a mystery? We have another depiction of it in the south transept stained glass. One window shows the scene of the crucifixion, one of the bleakest moments in the Christian story. The suffering, the grief, the death of Jesus. Its twin window is not of the resurrection, as you might expect, but of the Ascension.

The story and theology of Ascension is far from easy. Luke is the only gospel writer who mentions it in his gospel and in his sequel about the beginnings of the Christian Church in the Book of Acts. All the Luke says in his gospel is a scant four words, "carried up into heaven", and in Acts, "as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. The presenting problem on the one hand is the disposal of the body of Jesus, what happened to Jesus after Easter. That, I believe, is not the real issue. The real issue is the continuation of the church when Jesus is no longer present. That is a much more acute issue. Ascension is much more of a Church issue than a Jesus issue.

Standing around, looking into heaven for a while, the disciples turn around and move on. And in that turning, the Christian church begins to take shape. Out of mystery, which still has a part to play, the disciples are left with the challenge of what to do next. The Church is still responding to that question about what to do next.

The story of the Ascension deals straightforwardly with the fact that this fearful, waiting community, which is anxious and bewildered, has no power of its own. It possesses none and can generate none for itself. It has no privilege and no cause for self-congratulation. And yet,

oddly enough, power is given that causes this fragile little community to have energy, courage, imagination and resources completely disproportionate to its size.

The Ascension is cloaked in mystery, has inspired artists and musicians, is a joyful and not mournful episode, God has gone up with a shout, and God's people wait uncertainly but expectantly for something to happen next. In the imagery of Ascension Jesus was surrounded by a cloud, the disciples were surrounded by a cloud, and everyone moves onward or upwards. Everyone gets on with the next stage in the unfolding purposes of God. Whenever this story is alluded to in the Bible there is nothing conventional, controlled or predictable about it. The nature of the story requires a different way of speaking and thinking. Clouds and shouts and uncertainty and wonder. What we glimpse through the mists and hints is God's new rule – beyond our logic or control. And then we see what happened next: a transformed community. A community not certain about what had happened, but sure enough to affirm its identity and to get on with its new work. The Ascension is not about getting the body of Jesus off the earth. It is a dramatic moment where the presence of Jesus in the Church is lifted up and converted into something that people can not only see, but also be transformed by.

Jesus, out of sight, out of mind? I wonder how many people during the ongoing lockdown feel the same way? Unable to get out and meet family and friends? No access to the internet? Nobody phoning them, or knocking on their door. Let's face it, for some people, even before the lockdown, this was their daily existence. Now that more of us have experienced, even in a small way, what this is like, perhaps we might resolve, when this time is passed, to do something more about the socially isolated and lonely in our community. They will still be there when the restrictions lift.

The presence of Jesus in our community through His body the Church is still to be seen. We may be cloaked in mystery to many of the population, but by God the world would be a less vibrant place if we were not stepping out from the clouds, not only worshipping but also serving. Speaking to people on the phone over the last few weeks it has become even more clear to me just what it is our Church provides not only to our members but to our community, and beyond.

The Church may not be open, but we are still present in so many little acts of kindness which take on an even greater significance at a time like this. We may be out of sight, but we are not out of mind.

It seems to me that it is about time for the clouds to lift over the Church. In his closing address to the General Assembly a few years ago, the then Moderator, John Chalmers said, “A tide has to be turned because a generation of people out there are being invited to live a life of disbelief – if not unbelief. And there is no justification for that. This Church of ours has to stop its navel gazing, get out from under subjects that no one is actually talking about and get out there and capitalise on the fact that people still want purpose and faith in their lives, they just need it to be: accessible, relevant, generous and forgiving.” John Chalmers is convener of the Assembly Trustees and their report to this year’s socially distant Assembly continues to grapple with the hard issues the Church faces today, particularly the financial impact of the lockdown, where it is estimated that the Church may lose something like 30% of its income. That is also true for us here in Morningside.

The clouds need to lift, and if God has gone up with a shout, we can still go on with a shout too. We do not claim a privileged place by right, but by dint of the good that we do in civic society. We have a place at the table, and we have a voice that has to be heard because of the things we can speak out on – equality, justice, poverty and a brighter vision for the future.

This time of Ascension is a time of celebration, of turning away from inward looking, and out to a world that needs the message of hope and love we offer and live. The French novelist Victor Hugo once wrote that, “When a man is out of sight it is not too long before he is out of mind.” Our faith seeks to challenge and change that, particularly for the continuing presence and work of Jesus, through people like us.

Kenneth Grahame, born in Edinburgh, wrote in his book, *The Wind in the Willows*: “The Mole had long wanted to make the acquaintance of the Badger. He seemed, by all accounts, to be such an important personage and, though rarely visible, to make his unseen influence felt by

everybody about the place.” That may be more like it with Jesus: rarely visible, but His unseen influence is felt by everybody about the place.ⁱ

At the time of the Ascension, Jesus gave His disciples their marching orders. He had suffered and died and risen from the dead. It was time to turn away from fault and failing, find the strength God’s Spirit will bring, and to make a difference. Lockdown ties our hands, but not our hearts. Lockdown restricts our feet, but not our imagination. Speculation about the end of lockdown doesn’t help, but one day, soon enough, we will emerge from behind its cloud, and be visibly present once more. Christ may have ascended, but we, His followers remain here on earth, doing His work loudly and proudly until He comes again.

The French novelist Emile Zola once said of his life: “If you ask me what I came to do in this world...I will answer you: I came to live out loud.”

We pray for that time when, beyond the lockdown, we may livie out loud again.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Kenneth Graham, *The Wind in the Willows*, p46