

Ascension Day

Luke 24.44-53

18 May 2023

St Luke's, Chelsea

'See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.' Words from Isaiah (52.13), which we heard read 43 days ago – on Good Friday. In our Christian reading of that Hebrew prophecy, Christ is lifted up on the cross, raised up by the Roman soldiers so that all can see the shameful fate of the one who claimed to be the King of the Jews.

It is tempting to see that moment on Good Friday as the decisive occasion in the Christian story. Here, after all, is the point when Jesus declares 'It is finished!' (John 19.30). Or we might twin that raising up on Good Friday with a second raising, three days later. 'Christ died for our sins,' writes Paul to the Corinthians, 'he was buried, and ... he was raised on the third day' (1 Cor 15.3-4). That pattern of burial and rising is important too. It is, after all, the pattern of our Christian lives. As Paul writes to the Romans: '[W]e have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Romans 6.4).

Yet there is a third raising up that we gather today to mark. It is not quite as marked today in our worshipping lives. The crowds here tonight are less than for Good Friday, or for Easter Day. But in the scriptures the ascending of Christ into the heavens is no less important a moment. To the Philippians, in that great hymning of Christ's incarnation, Paul praises Christ who 'humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross' (Phil 2.8). And what follows? 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name' (Phil 2.9). It is as if the resurrection and ascension are one unfolding movement of ascent, a rising in two parts. Echoes perhaps of Jesus' words in the garden to Mary Magdalene: 'Do not hold on to me ... I am ascending to my Father' (John 20.17).

Today, with Christ's ascension, the great symphony of salvation is nearly at an end. But there is one more, if you'll excuse the pun, movement still to come. Will it be a downward motion, a second coming of Christ down to earth to bring justice to all? Will it be an upward motion, as we are invited to the heavenly banquet? With hearts filled with God's Spirit, we wait.

Yet like the disciples returning to Jerusalem, we are called to wait with 'joy' (Luke 24.52). By Christ's perfect sacrifice, by his mighty resurrection, by his glorious ascension, we recall the mysteries of our salvation. And we ask for God's grace that we too may 'lift up our hearts', until we are brought to the place where, as Charles Wesley so wonderfully puts it:

There we shall with thee remain,
partners of thine endless reign;
there thy face unclouded see,
find our heaven of heavens in thee.¹

¹ The last verse of 'Hail the day that sees him rise'.