

Sermon Notes for Ascension

“he was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God” (Gospel)

The Gospel reading says very little about the Ascension. True, but that is not the first problem. This is part of the “long ending” of Mark, and we had better be clear: Mark did not write it. The style is very different, and 16:9 is not a continuation of 16:8 (the last certain verse) but takes us back to the start of the chapter. It is also a fact that two major early manuscripts do not have the long ending, and there is a Patristic tradition against it being a genuine part of Mark's gospel. But to remove it from Mark is not to condemn it. This is a summary of the resurrection period; it may be early (for it is not fanciful); it is not for the most part derivative from the other gospels. Scripture is what the church reads in its worship (or at least views as available to read) rather than a list of approved authors, and the long ending has been so read for a very long time.

Neither in the Gospel nor in the account in Acts do we have a description of the Ascension, for it is not a physical event. Going higher does not bring us nearer to God. We are tempted to locate the Ascension on a mountain top, but that is to impose Matthew's final appearance of the risen Lord (in Galilee) on the other accounts. In fact, Matthew might be thought a *post*-Ascension appearance, for “all authority hath been given unto me” (already) rather than is about to be so given. In Luke and the long ending, we merely have the assertion of a current truth in heaven. For “a cloud received him” indicates the Father's presence, and “was received up into heaven” is a divine passive which indicates the Father's action – and a euphemism for that very presence of God which no man, even Moses, could endure. For the Lord to be taken into that presence is, in the conventions of theological imagination, to be given that authority which we rejoice in today.

The long ending is rather plain and brief in manner, so we miss how extreme it is (except in the context of the rest of the New Testament, in which it is simply normal). We do not (even if we are monarchists) easily spot the shocking idea of the Lord *sitting* in the presence of God – and moreover, on the right hand (as if such locational ideas make sense in heaven). These are ideas which lead to the lynch-mob (ask Stephen!) But these are the ways in which the Jewish understanding of God was turned upside down. Sadly, to appreciate that one needs some elementary knowledge of Intertestamental literature and early rabbinics. The canonical Old Testament is only a remoter background. The ideas can be expressed in terms of philosophical theology, but that is not a help to most people. Better retain the pictures and seek to appreciate them better.

The Ascension is a strictly practical doctrine, for it is only because of it that the Church has authority. This hardly concerns those who are convinced that the Church does not and cannot have authority given it by God (while making the utmost use of such authority as may be given by Caesar). But if there is no basis for the life of a church, why should it matter? If we have no authority to preach the Gospel, or to baptize, what are we offering beyond a weird form of community? If we reject the ministry of signs, which Jesus exercised in one sense (while refusing to use it for mere self-demonstration), ours seems to be the wisdom of Ahaz (Isaiah 7:12) – a practical evasion of God, which is atheism.

Now of course I do not recommend Christians to “take up serpents”. The risk of self-magnifying is too great. Nor knowingly to take poison. Healing is a much more subtle matter; any Christian must on request pray for a sick person, and a priest may rightly use the laying on of hands or anointing with oil. (All this as well as simple caring actions.) Similarly with the casting out of devils; happy the period in which this ministry seemed unnecessary, but possession (real or imagined) is now a major problem and it is right that some well-trained persons should respond (and nobody else except in the gravest of emergencies). Christians have done much to learn languages and so preach the Gospel to every creature. Alas, never have Christians had better tools - to spread error.

The long ending does not probe motivation, but we have to. What we do, we do because it is right. We do not force God's hand; we cannot. God is not gracious because of our prayers (or works); but the Ascension is a first-fruit of that graciousness. If what we do is by others seen as a sign, so be it.

“Unbelief and hardness of heart” were even in the infant Church; how much more to be expected now? The Ascension is the great feast of the Christian hope; it is not a promise of an easy life for the believer.