

ASCENSION

The Ascension of Jesus Christ was a central theme of the preaching of the early church. From the very beginning those first Christians were convinced that Jesus had not only gone to be with God, but that he had been exalted to a position of great authority 'at his right hand'. In talking to the children at school last week I tried to explain that after his death and resurrection Jesus was taken up into heaven. I said "this time of the year we celebrate the Ascension which is the time when a great man was taken up into a position of supreme authority and power." I asked them, "do you know who I'm talking about?" A small girl put up her hand and said "our new prime minister". I refused to be drawn. "No" I said, "the great man was Jesus of Nazareth". As St. Peter said in his famous sermon in Acts 2, "Now raised to the heights at God's right hand, he has received from the Father the Holy Spirit which was promised, and what you see and hear is the outpouring of that Spirit".

Hence the phrase 'at his right hand' has such great significance that it is included in the creed which we repeat at every Eucharist. "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father".

In the days when these events took place most people believed that the universe had a three decker structure consisting of the heavens above, the earth below, and the nether regions below the earth. Most people in those early days would probably assume that Jesus would have literally ascended into those heavenly realms above the sky. Hence Luke describes how Jesus 'blessed his disciples and withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven'. The children at Wold Newton school had no difficulty with this idea, except that they would prefer the phrase 'He was beamed up Scotty'.

Our modern understanding of the structure of the universe demands that we use different metaphors with which to talk about the Ascension. However the underlying doctrine remains the same as

ever, which is that Christ is Lord. The earliest form of the Christian creed was "Jesus is Lord". This is the fundamental truth which we proclaim as Christian people of the 21st. century. What are the implications for us?

The first implication is that the teaching of Jesus which is recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament should be our guide book for living. The sayings of Jesus, "Blessed are the poor" - "Blessed are the peacemakers" - "Love your enemies" these sayings should be as important to us and as non-negotiable as the sayings of Mao were to the communists of China.

The lifestyle of Jesus - his ministry of teaching and healing - his self giving love - his vulnerability - his suffering - his cross - should be a pattern of behaviour for each one of us.

We should not even attempt to live a Christian life in our own un-aided strength. The outcome of the Ascension event was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church on the day of Pentecost. If we ignore the work of the Holy Spirit. or if we refuse to be open to his influence in our lives, we shall be like a vehicle which refuses to be filled with petrol or like a computer which is not plugged into the mains. It might appear to be a vehicle, it might appear to be a computer, but it will not operate to anything like its full potential.
