

Reflections for Ascension Day 2020

The passage in Luke 24: 50-52 which relates to Jesus being lifted into heaven reminds me of the story of the Soviet astronaut who, after returning successfully to earth from a mission in space, declared that he didn't find God 'up there' and concluded that all religion is false. Although I have sympathy for this kind of understanding of God as living up there in the sky or heaven, I must say that this is mistaken.

For me, this passage starts to make sense when I shift my thinking from the Jesus who floats away in the clouds to what this text is actually saying about the relationship between Jesus and God. Obviously, this implies a new understanding of heaven; an understanding that is different from that of the astronaut who, after only a short distance into space, thought he knew all about God's movements and dwellings. We are encouraged to see heaven, not much as a place, but as a state of being, a human expression for where God resides. Put simply, the meaning of the ascension is couched in the new understanding that Jesus is with God, in the same way as when we affirm that Jesus is "sitting at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). However, such thinking of God and Jesus as two beings sitting next to each other can also be misleading if we are not careful. We know that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are not distinct in the way that they can sit next to each other. They rather exist within each other. What ascension is saying to us therefore is that it is no longer possible to talk about God without talking about Jesus. The disciples (and us) must learn that the only way to talk about God must include talking about the crucified, risen and living Jesus. This is the God who knows loneliness, betrayal, rejection, thirst, and even death.

I suspect there are many of us Christians who still want to hold on to the picture of Jesus ascension into heaven involving the clouds and the sky. In this short reflection I want to encourage ourselves to take on these new lenses through which we learn to no longer define God in a way that leaves Him completely detached from our human experience. The ascended Jesus, who sits at God's right hand, reveals a God who is vulnerable, embroiled in human affairs; a God who is approachable and lives with us. It is very comforting to know for sure that when we turn to God in times of distress such as our current lockdown situation, we are not addressing a deity aloof and unfamiliar with our struggles. He knows our trials, pain and sufferings intimately well. He comforts us by identifying with our pain and assures us that affliction will not have the final word because as we read in Romans 8 verse 34 nothing can separate us from his love.

Paul Nzacahayo 20/05/2020

Let us pray

Eternal and gracious God,
grant that as we believe your son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ,
to have ascended with triumph
into your kingdom in heaven,
so may we also in heart and mind ascend to where he is
and with him continually dwell;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

From the Methodist Worship Book (1999) p.544