

The Fifth Easter Reflection and Music for week of 24 May 2020:

The Feast of the Ascension

I am writing this fifth reflection on Ascension Day, a day in the Christian calendar on which we remember Christ's ascent to heaven forty days after his resurrection. On the morning of ascension day the choir normally ascends the college chapel tower at some unearthly hour in the morning to sing an ascension day service. Since this is not possible during lockdown, we can at least mark Ascension Day (albeit a day or two after!) by considering a less well known painting of Rembrandt, 'The Ascension of Christ'. The painting was one in a series of five paintings of the Passion of Christ¹ commissioned from the Dutch court in about 1628 through Constantin Huygens, secretary to the Prince of Orange.² It was completed by 1636 but never held in particularly high regard.



The way Rembrandt's painting is laid out is very similar to Titian's 'The Assumption of the Virgin', 1516-18. Centre stage, in an elevated position, we see Christ gazing up to heaven. The glory of Christ is depicted in his luminous robes, his expectant gaze and outstretched arms. If you look closely you can see that Christ's hands are pierced: death and suffering have given way to glorification. God's favour is upon Christ as the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, hovers

above Christ's head. Cherubs bear Christ on the cloud as he ascends from earth to heaven leaving startled disciples gazing on below. In the foreground one dressed in a red or orange robe leans back in amazement. Chubby cherubs look on from the sides rejoicing at the sight. Rembrandt has

¹ The Ascension of Christ, 1636. Oil on canvas, 93 x 69 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

² The series started with the Raising of the Cross and Descent from the Cross. He was hired to create small versions of Rubens famous altarpieces in Antwerp, the Raising of the Cross and the Descent from the Cross

faithfully depicted many features of the narrative in Acts 1 (though cherubs are not mentioned in the scriptural text!)

But what are we to make of Christ's ascension? The language of 'lift off', together with depictions of 'heaven' and 'earth' in such literalistic imagery, are at first sight not easy to relate to. However such spatial language and imagery is necessarily employed in order to point to realities beyond our present understanding. For this reason it is the theology relating to Christ's ascension that New Testament writers focus on. For the Author of Hebrews, the ascension and exaltation of the risen Christ is the starting point of his exhortation. The language he uses in Hebrews chapters 1 and 2 symbolises Christ's supremacy over all powers and authorities, as foretold in many of the Psalms.³ Jesus' passage from earth through the heavens conveys the idea of Jesus as forerunner of believers as he passes through death, rises and enters into his Father's presence. The idea of Jesus as forerunner should encourage believers that they too will pass through their current difficulties and suffering and eventually enter the presence of God. The pastoral dimension of Christ's ascension is further emphasised by the Author of Hebrews in the designation of the ascended Christ as our High Priest who intercedes for us.⁴ This High Priest is uniquely equipped to sympathise with human weakness because Christ himself experienced weakness and suffering. But perhaps one of the most important doctrines that flows from the Ascension is that the Christian hope focuses on the redemption of the material as well as the spiritual realm. As C S Lewis contended, heaven is much more than a 'wintry and desolate' state of mind, rather the unique Christian hope looks forward to a new material order: redeemed bodies, and a new heaven and a new earth. As C S Lewis wrote:

By teaching the resurrection of the body it [the doctrine] teaches that Heaven is not merely a state of the spirit but a state of the body as well: and therefore a state of Nature as a whole. Christ, it is true, told His hearers that the Kingdom of Heaven was 'within' or 'among' them. But His hearers were not merely in 'a state of mind'. The planet He had created was beneath their feet, His sun above their heads; blood and lungs and guts were working in the

³ For example Psalm 102:25-7; 110:1.

⁴ Hebrews 4:14f.

bodies He had invented, photons and sound waves of His devising were blessing them with the sight of His human face and the sound of His voice. We are never merely in a state of mind. The prayer and the meditation made in howling wind or quiet sunshine, in morning alacrity or evening resignation, in youth or age, good health or ill, may be equally, but are differently, blessed. Already in this present life we have all seen how God can take up all these seeming irrelevances into the spiritual fact and cause them to bear no small part in making the blessing of that moment to be the particular blessing it was—as fire can burn coal and wood equally but a wood fire is different from a coal one. From this factor of environment Christianity does not teach us to desire a total release. We desire, like St Paul, not to be unclothed but to be re-clothed: to find not the formless Everywhere-and-Nowhere but the promised land, that Nature which will be always and perfectly—as present Nature is partially and intermittently—the instrument for that music which will then arise between Christ and us.⁵

The Christian hope is therefore not for some ephemeral and disembodied reality but a hope that celebrates nature and restored relationships with Christ. Whilst the Ascension may appear to be the poor relation of Christian feasts, the theology it encapsulates is profound, expressing hope that Christ is above all and will one day return to realise a new fully-redeemed created order.

The Collect (Prayer) for Ascension Day

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ
to have ascended into the heavens,
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
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

The Chaplain, Revd Dr Elizabeth Pitkethly

Note on the choir anthem S S Wesley, Blessed be the God and Father from Professor Edward

Higginbottom

⁵ Lewis, C. S. 'Miracles: A Preliminary Study',. (New York: Harper One. 2001), 259-60.

This week sees the third and final installment of Wesley's anthem Blessed be the God and Father. The Covid-19 environment has brought with it many surprises for musicians working in churches and chapels. Not the least of them is a willingness to think outside the box, in this respect to present an anthem in three installments. It comes of necessity (the additional time and resource needed to record each voice and to produce a synchronized whole), and of an opportunity to exploit our new medium. Any musical analysis of Wesley's anthem would recognize its tripartite structure, and the degree to which the three sections stand independently of one another. So, no harm is done. And in any case, in this the third week, you can hear the whole thing. In addition, the process allows us to gather up the experience of the work in a novel and distinctive fashion. Our first hearing is of a text centred on the hope abiding in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is distinct from the focus of the second section: how we live our lives in the context of the promise of immortality. The third section, newly added this week, is a paean to the eternal truth of God's promise. Each is a self-sufficient. Knit together they form a coherent and powerful statement about living our lives in full awareness of the hope of resurrection and the permanency of God's promise.

In a show of solidarity with those taking exams, I wear sub-fusc for the final section of the anthem. It's not because I couldn't find anything else.