

Ascension Day Sermon (Archbishop Rowan Williams)

One popular hymn for the Feast of the Ascension contains these lines: “Thou hast raised our human nature / in the clouds at God's right hand.”

The ascension of Jesus in this context becomes a celebration of the extraordinary fact that our humanity in all its variety, in all its vulnerability, has been taken by Jesus into the heart of the divine life. ‘Man with God is on the throne,’ that hymn goes on. Quite a shocking line if you start thinking about it. And that of course is first of all good news about humanity itself – the humanity that we all know to be stained, wounded, imprisoned in various ways; this humanity—yours and mine—is still capable of being embraced by God, shot through with God’s glory, received and welcomed in the burning heart of reality itself: “to the throne of Godhead, / to the Father’s breast,” as another hymn puts it. But let’s pursue that theme just a little bit further. Jesus takes our human nature—yours and mine—to the heart of God and he speaks to God his father in a human voice. In heaven the language they speak is human (not just angelic). Our words (human words) are heard at the very centre of the burning heart of reality

Saint Augustine many centuries ago reflected on this in his many sermons on the psalms. Like most of us, St Augustine was rather worried by the fact that the psalms are not always fit for polite company. They are full of rude, angry, violent, hateful remarks; they contain protests against God, and spectacular ill-wishing against human beings. The psalms, you might say, are as human as it gets. So why do we recite them in public worship? Aren’t they just a reminder of those aspects of our humanity that are best left out of God’s sight?

Augustine’s point was this: apart from the fact that it is no use trying to leave bits of our humanity out of God’s sight, God has actually taken an initiative in making our language his own. And therefore you have to imagine as you say or hear the psalms that Jesus is speaking them. And there’s another shocking thought – Jesus saying, ‘where are you, God?’ Jesus saying, ‘my God why have you forsaken me?’ (But then of course he did.) Jesus saying, ‘Destroy my enemies’, and ‘Blessed are those who dash their children against the stones’... goodness knows what. Well, says the saint, it doesn’t mean that Jesus is telling us that any and every human cry is good. It doesn’t mean that Jesus endorses ideas about revenge on your enemies, or even shaking your fist at God the Father. But it does mean that Jesus treats us, our feelings, our tumultuous personalities, as real. He takes us seriously. He takes us seriously when we’re moving towards God and each other in love; and, amazingly, he takes us seriously when we’re moving in the opposite direction – when we are spinning downwards into destructive, hateful fantasies. He doesn’t let go of us and he doesn’t lose sight of us when we seek to lock ourselves up in the dark.

Jesus hears all the words we speak – words of pain and protest and rage and violence. He hears them and he takes them and in the presence of the God the Father he says, ‘This is the humanity I have brought home. It’s not a pretty sight; it’s not edifying and impressive and heroic, it’s just real: real and needy and confused, and here it is (this complicated humanity) brought home to heaven, dropped into the burning heart of God – for healing and for transformation. That’s quite a lot to bear in mind when you’re saying or hearing the Psalms. But it’s probably the only way of coping with rather a lot of them. But all of that in the saint’s thinking arises from this basic insight: Jesus ascends to heaven. The human life in which God has made himself most visible, most tangible, disappears from the human world in its former shape and is somehow absorbed into the endless life of God. And our humanity, all of it, goes with Jesus. When Saint Paul speaks of Christ ‘filling all in all’, as we heard in the epistle (Ephesians 1.15-end), we must bear in mind that picture: Jesus’ humanity taking into it all the difficult, resistant, unpleasant bits of our humanity, taking them into the heart of love where alone they can be healed and transfigured.

So yes, indeed, the Ascension is a celebration of the glory of humanity, the unlikely possibilities of people like you and me, the eternal potential locked up in our muddled struggling lives. And a celebration too of God’s capacity, through his Holy Spirit, to reach into those parts of humanity that are so far from glorious, that are rebellious and troubled and broken, to breathe through them, to take them home, to drop them into that fire and melt them and recast them. The promise of the Father is that we as Christians will receive that level and dimension of divine life that we call ‘Holy Spirit’, so that, like Jesus, we will find that nothing human is alien to us. And the promise of the Father is that by the love of Christ spreading through us and in us, the world may be brought home to Christ, who brings it home to his Father.

We who are his body, ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all’ have to hear with his ears and see with his eyes. In the midst of a humanity flailing and struggling, failing and suffering, we see and we hear what God can do. We remember that Christ has ‘raised our human nature / in the clouds at God’s right hand’, and our compassion is deepened a hundred-fold, our awareness of pain is deepened a hundred-fold, and (please God) by the gift of the Spirit, our hope is deepened a thousand-fold.

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