



Power from on High

A Pastoral Letter for the Teulu Asaph, on the Eve of the Ascension 2020
From Bishop Gregory

The Ascension of Christ into Heaven – the feast which the Church keeps tomorrow – is a break point. It is the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus - the last time he was physically present to the disciples before he returned to the Father. This mysterious event is described in the scriptures as a literal ascent, but it is not quite like the space shuttle achieving the momentum to break free of Earth's gravity in a literal way: it is rather a transfer from this temporal realm into the eternal, into the ubiquity of God's presence. Although I say it is not a literal breaking free of Earth's gravity, however, this phrase has a truth which actually makes for a magnificent metaphor.

The gravity of Earth might be used to symbolise everything that holds us back from holiness, from the ability to enter into that fullness of life which God wills for us. In our own lives we see the failure to be all we'd like to be, and all that God would like us to be (which is what the Bible calls "sin"). In the world, we see mankind's sin as a whole rolled out in the manifold injustices, oppressions and violence that can wrench our world out of kilter. In the Ascension, Jesus quite simply breaks free of all that, but also invites us to break free as well. In the Gospel according to Luke, almost his last words to the disciples are: "... wait patiently ... until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24.49) This is an invitation to await the Holy Spirit, who will break in and empower the disciples at Pentecost to turn the world upside down, and to break free with the Gospel.

Even religion, however, can feel like gravity pulling us down at times. Weighed down with obligations, we struggle to keep going and to meet expectations. However, God simply doesn't want faith to be like that. We are called to be a people who become acquainted with the Truth about life, embodied in the fullness of life lived and taught by Jesus and extended to us by invitation, and "the truth shall set you free" (John 8.32)

I have written in previous weeks about how I believe that we in our own discipleship, and the nation in its life, cannot go back to old ways when we are released from lockdown. I believe that there is also a great deal of "gravity" which keeps the Church in a state of heaviness, from which we are called to break free in the power of the Spirit. The renewal of the Church will not be about going back to the glories of the past, but about finding a confidence for the future. The faith remains the same, but the Church which bears witness to it has to change. I would like to see a Church which is free of doing things the way we've always done them, to become a Church which reimagines worship and word and sacraments for what they are – channels enabling us to draw close to God, that he might fill us with his "power from on high". I would like to see a Church which sees its job, not as maintaining buildings and services as they were for the last hundred years, but as building full lives, which are based on faith, on following Jesus, on serving the world in love. I would like to serve in a Church where the question on everyone's lips is not: "How will we keep going?" but "How can we be more like Jesus?"

When Jesus said to his disciples "I came that you might have life, and life in all its abundance" (John 10.10), I am sure that he saw faith as life giving, joy imparting, strength inducing, peace communicating. When I was a student in Cambridge, I remember a church which had a big notice on the way in: "In this Church we believe the fundamentals of the Christian Faith, i.e. the Authorised Version of the Bible and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer." I can't help feeling that that particular Church was confusing the medium with the message. The King James Bible can be a magnificent medium, and a quiet Prayer Book Communion can still nourish my soul, but they won't do that for everyone, and Jesus told us to go out, and bring the joy of faith to others.

People want to see how things make a difference in the modern world. If faith leaves people as grumpy and as staid as ever, then people leave the faith. It's as simple as that.

If I am honest with you, Clare and I need to declutter in Esgobty. When our Church buildings reopen, we will all need to declutter our discipleship, and seek "power from on high", so that God will help us break free from the gravity of all that holds us back, and be caught up in a vision of the heaven which beckons us onward.

May you have an amazing Ascensiontide, and a powerful Pentecost,

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