

## The Depths and the Heights: the Seventh Sunday of Easter

**Readings: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; John 17:20-26** (see also Ephesians 3:14 – 4:10)

'How are you?' A very common and simple question; and there's a very English kind of reply to it 'How are you?' – 'Oh, bearing up, thanks.' 'How are you?' – 'Jogging along, mate.' 'How are you?' – 'Oh, you know, up and down.'

'Up and down' ... but not too violently either up or down. Not 'Well, yesterday I was down in utter despair and on the point of death; but now I'm on a high, I've got these fantastic new drugs and I've fallen in love.' No, gently up and down; no storms, just waves on a calm sea, a life of ordinary undemanding stability.

Now that gentle life of peace and moderation, avoiding the depths and the heights, is what *religion* is often supposed to instil. But when we proclaim the *Christian Creed*, as we shall in a moment, the 'ups and downs' are far from gentle waves.

'He descended from heaven ... he was lifted up on the cross ... he descended to the dead ... raised on the third day ... ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of God ...' This is no language of moderation and stability, no recipe for a peaceful life. It's a helter-skelter, lurching between heights and depths.

And more. That story told in our Creed of extreme ups and downs isn't the story of Jesus alone. It is to be the story of *us* his followers. Nowhere is that clearer than at this feast of Ascension, the ultimate and extreme 'up' which forms the climax of Easter and the crown of the year. Jesus is raised and exalted *for our glory and for our joy*, for our ascension into the presence and the life of God.

As we heard in Jesus' prayer just now, 'The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. ... Father, I desire that these also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am ...' Or, as St Paul puts it, 'our citizenship is in heaven'; the home of God (pictured mythologically as 'heaven' or the sky) is *our home* too.

Note that we are 'citizens', not subjects. We don't look up to the ascended King in heaven as slaves, but as friends. We don't 'submit to Christ as Lord', as the new rite of baptism disgracefully demands of us (Jesus never asked anybody to submit except demons). No, as early Christian teachers delighted to say, 'he became man so that we might *become divine*.'

Yet it's not all 'up' and no 'down'. *The way* to this divine life and exaltation is the way of *Jesus* – who first *descended* to the utter depths. The man of

heaven, immersed in all the filth and degradation, the violence and mortality, of this nether world, of which we of course are citizens. Then, as the Letter to the Ephesians has it, 'he who descended is he who also *ascended* far above all the heavens, so *that he might fill all things*.' Yes, the divine presence is *universal*: there is no alien territory which it shuns, nor any sacred enclosure where it is contained. He fills all things: the heights and the depths.

The common religious instinct is to seek such a safe, peaceful enclosure. To do so you must shun both extremities: the mud, the conflict and pain of the nether world, *and* the glory and ecstasy of heaven. I wonder whether the reason for the Church's decline across most of Europe is that she has largely lost interest both in the day-to-day world and in the ultimate mystery of God, but is deeply interested in herself and her own flourishing.

Oh yes, the mountainous extremes of descent and ascent, where Jesus strides ahead, are dizzying. So our temptation may be to seek refuge in a half-way house, a suspended state. Say, in an undemanding folk religion of polite 'spiritual' experience and crooning choruses; or else in a pompous State religion, the tawdry world of flags and flunkies. But either of these avoids the heights and the depths, avoids the true, immense freedom and glory that Jesus invites us to.

Alleluia! Christ is risen, Christ is ascended, bearing with him our flesh, and in his ascent kicking over all earthly thrones and pretensions. So, for us who try to follow him, the age of emperors and kings and temples is gone; the age of freedom, the age of the Spirit is here. That's what we celebrate in next Sunday's feast of Pentecost.

I quoted earlier from the NT *Letter to the Ephesians*, which is a kind of extended celebration of Christ's ascension and ours. Right in the middle of that letter the writer prays that 'you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fulness of God'. A universal presence, in all four dimensions, vertical and horizontal.

But note how those four dimensions, breadth and length and height and depth, intersect and form the shape of *the cross*. For this universal presence is centred in one particular man, crucified at one particular moment in history. And centred for us at this altar, where we eat and drink as his friends, and which is for us the upper room and the Mount of Olives, the depth of earth and the height of heaven.

So, with joy, and without fearful submission, let's stand to celebrate those bold divine and human ups and downs, in the words of the Creed .....

*Christopher Burdon*