

Easter 7 – After Ascension
St James, Colwall, May 4th, 2008

A couple of years ago I went to see a dramatised performance of Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. I remember Anne took some of her girls along to see it and apart from Adam and Eve having no clothes on, the bit they were struck with was the thought that someone could write a thousand line poem and even more that others could learn it by heart and act it. Well, I suppose I was impressed by those things too, but one other thing which impressed me was the scene where the fallen angels get together and decide what to do after being cast out of heaven. It was portrayed as a political meeting, with Satan haranguing the crowd over the PA, but everyone having the chance to put their spoke in. In effect, heaven was portrayed as a dictatorship and hell a democracy.

Possibly this was a reflection on the turbulent political times Milton lived through, but I think it also goes deeply into human nature. Everyone, it seems to me, wants to have someone to look after them and take all the awkward decisions, leaving them to get on with enjoying their lives and this view often surfaces in elections. They are in the news at the moment, and I hope you will go and vote in our own election on May 8th, but we do tend to have this idea that a general election will give us a new prime minister like a knight in shining armour, who will make everything better. And of course, after 6 months, that vision is entirely dissipated at which point you have two options: you can either sit around quietly grumbling and wait for the next general election, or you can actually do something and make our political leaders aware of how they are falling short of our expectations. Now it seems to me that we should do the latter: there is more to democracy than exercising your vote every five years.

Now there is an analogy here with the situation after the Ascension. During His life on earth, Jesus was the leader. Everything that happened flowed from what He did or said and the disciples simply supported His ministry. The message of the Ascension is as clear as can be: "Now you are on your own, lads!" And that applies to us too. The Ascension is telling us that what goes on in this world will be the result of what we do. We are responsible for it. There is no one who is going to sort things out for us: and it's an awe inspiring thought.

But of course, we do have the promise of the Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth: but note that it does not say, will tell us what to do. Some people have a very simple idea of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I may be maligning him, but I get the impression that prior to the invasion of Iraq, President Bush thought that he had got on to his spiritual telephone and received the answer, "Smite Saddam!" It is not quite like that. If we are to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have to realise that we are entering into the presence of God and coming before the throne of grace and that should affect our state of mind. The first thought that enters into our head is likely to be our own, so we have to empty our minds of prejudice and misconceptions. It takes time to receive guidance and effort to understand the problems of the world. And we must be motivated by love for others, not by our own wishes and desires.

So the message of the Ascension is that the world is our responsibility: it will only get better as a result of our actions. God will help us, but it requires engagement and effort on our part. It requires us to look at the world with God's eyes and to be open to its needs, but even more important, to have some idea of how things could be better. Another world, the Kingdom of God, is possible and we should work for it.

Now I could end my sermon here, but I know that someone will say, "but Chris, that's all very well, but what should we *do*?" What should we in Colwall be doing to take responsibility for the world?

Well, the first thing to do is to look at it. If you are anything like me, it is very easy to get involved only in what we are immediately doing and be unaware of the world around us. Some years ago, my next door neighbour died and I remember it was several days before I found out. Work was pressing at the time and I hadn't noticed anything different. It is so easy to be so focused on our own concerns that we do not notice what is going on around us. But we all have a duty of care to our neighbours. In France, that is actually written in the *Code Napoleon*, but in our case it should be written in our hearts.

But it does need to be sensitively done, which is what I mean when I say it should flow from love. Let me give you a silly example. As you know I suffer from a tremor; it's not always as bad as at present, but for years it has been difficult to carry a drink. So what do you do when it's your turn to buy a round? I can manage to carry one drink, but not two, so it's a question of going backwards and forwards to the bar to ferry them back. But sometimes people say, "let me give you a hand" – and it's very welcome. It's like any disability, you don't want a fuss made about it, but just occasionally you need a bit of help and it needs to be sensitively done by someone who can appreciate what it feels like. Now a tremor is a very minor problem, but there are problems all around us, not necessarily physical, and we need to be sensitive to people's needs but also sensitive to their feelings.

Now I think that Colwall doesn't do badly when it comes to being neighbourly but I wonder how well we do in thinking about the world outside? I have started being political in this sermon and I am going to carry on. We are faced by tremendous problems in the years ahead. I have gone on to you before about climate change, but it really is important. Our situation with a sensitivity to fuel supplies and a dependence on food imports is bad enough, but for most people in the developing world it is much worse. For many, it is a matter of life and death. But we don't want to be for ever responding to emergency appeals which get more and more frequent. Things have to change globally. We need trade justice; we need to make poverty history; we need to adapt to a low carbon economy; we need to engage in politics.

Now there are any number of things you can do individually to help meet these goals and many of them can leave you better off and healthier too. But we need to change society and make the world a better place. The Kingdom of God is good for us: consumer society is soul destroying. I recently read this splendid description of modern society as a racing commentary:

"triviality leads, followed closely by superficiality and mindless distraction. Vanity looks great while profundity is bringing up the rear. Pettiness is powering ahead along with passivity and indifference. Curiosity lost interest, wisdom was scratched and critical thought had to be put down. Ego is running wild and attention span continues to shorten and no one is betting on survival."

It was not always so. In the past, people thought of the future and had a vision of the destiny of the human race. And this inspired political actions ranging from votes for all to the welfare state. Political action is what we need now.

It's hard work. But when, after a session battering at the powers that be with little visible result and we start to ask ourselves, why am I doing all this, remember we are working for God and we are not alone. There is this lovely quote from William Temple: "The ascension of Christ is His liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent His removal from earth, but His constant presence everywhere on earth." And let us thank God that that is so.