

# *A Faith to Live By...*

## *Sermons on the Apostles' Creed*

### 7. "He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father..."

Notice that with this clause of the creed our attention shifts noticeably from things past to things present, from things done to things that are the result of those things done. The narration of God's saving activity in Christ's human history reaches its end, and a new phase of God's (and Christ's) relationship to the world is embarked upon. The 'ascension' occurs 40 days after the resurrection of Jesus from death, and with it a watershed is reached. The things that Jesus did and said and suffered, the days of his presence among us humanly now draw to a close, and he returns to his Father, from whence, at the story's outset, he 'came down' to pitch his tent and be with us.

At once, as intelligent men and women, we stumble over the language and are compelled to wonder whether we can take it seriously. All this 'up and down' stuff doesn't cut much ice in a world where geology and astronomy respectively paint us a different picture of things. That may have been good enough for first century Palestinians, but those of us who shuttle up and down the world's airways know



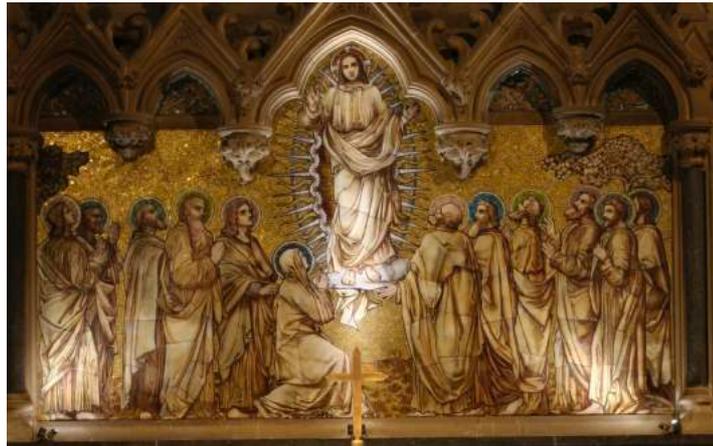
perfectly well that 'ascending' gets you nowhere other than a cramped seat with coffee with UHT and a bag of peanuts if you're lucky. But, as I have remarked before, such an objection demonstrates far more naivete than it ascribes to our ancient forebears, who may or may not have supposed odd things about the geography of the cosmos, but who certainly knew how spatial categories were



meant to function theologically and liturgically. They knew that, in one sense, God is everywhere and not limited by space as we are; but they believed too that God had his own special 'place' (how else might one express the matter?), 'from' which he comes to be with and alongside us; in it was perfectly natural in speaking of this 'place' (heaven) to picture it as 'high up', spatial metaphor which still pervades our ways of referring to that which is better, more exalted, and so on. But to ask 'how high?', 'how many metres, or miles?' is to commit a category error; it's the wrong sort of question to ask about that which is 'high and lifted up', whether that's God, the Queen, or the inflated price of petrol.

So, even though the altar reredos in our own church charmingly pictures the apostles gazing upwards as Jesus makes a vertical exit, leaving the prints of his feet tellingly in the sand, we needn't and shouldn't get hung up on the choreography or the physics of the circumstance. What Luke tells us, at the end of his Gospel, and

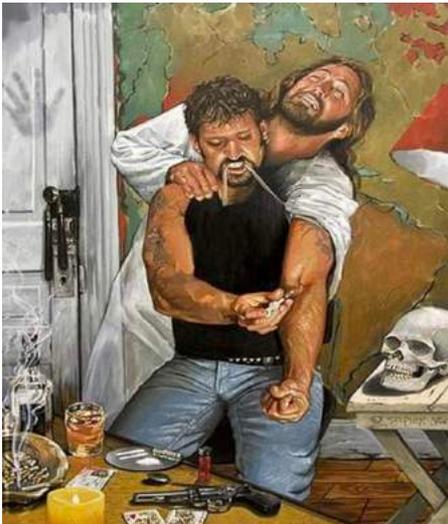
again in the first chapter of the Book of Acts, is that Jesus 'withdrew from them and was taken up into heaven', and that 'he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight'. What they saw and heard we will never know; but



it was clearly sufficient a) to leave them with the clear impression that this was not just another resurrection appearance, but a more final departure from them (notice that *all* the resurrection appearances end with Jesus' sudden disappearance) and, b) such as to convince them that this particular withdrawal signaled Jesus' return to his Father, a circumstance they would naturally have expressed as 'ascending' or being 'taken up' (the mention of clouds, of course, has nothing to do with meteorology, but is the natural symbol of God's presence on earth). So, we no more need to suppose a literal elevation of Jesus into midair at this point than we need posit a stork (or a spacecraft) bringing him 'down' as part of the nativity.

The New Testament writers refer elsewhere to this final departure of Jesus in a variety of ways. Some use the same language, of his 'ascension' (so, e.g., John 3:13; 20:17; Eph. 4:10), others of his 'being exalted' or being 'taken up' (Acts 1:2; 1 Tim. 3:16), others still of his 'going to the Father' (John 14:2, 28) or 'going into heaven' (1 Pet. 3:22). The language may vary, but the idea is the same one: Jesus, having once come from the Father to be with us, has now been taken back to be with his Father, and the disciples cannot expect to see him 'in the flesh' any longer. In that circumstance we might reasonably suppose that the disciples would be grieved or fearful. After all, having experienced the joy of the resurrection, having had Jesus restored to them after his arrest and death (albeit not quite the same as he had been previously), this second separation would surely have come as a bitter blow? But in fact the very opposite seems to have been the case. Instead, Luke tells us, 'they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God' (Lk. 24:53).

The reason seems to have been that the penny had finally dropped, and some of the things Jesus had said to them all along about coming from, being sent by and going back to his Father had begun to make some semblance of sense. (For a sustained reflection on the theme see especially John 14.) And in any case, this departure



wasn't really a departure from them at all, but an entry into a new phase and a new mode or manner of being with them. 'Remember', he tells them in Matthew's account of the same event, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Mt. 28.20). 'With' them and with others not just in the form of happy memories, or as some ghostly presence coming and going in the manner of a haunting; but with them *in precisely the way that God was and is with them* - holding them, surrounding them, sustaining them, closer even than they are to themselves. In fact, Jesus tells them, paradoxically, he must 'go away' precisely so that he can always be with them, through his Spirit whom he will send (see John 16:7). So, far from leaving them alone, Jesus withdraws precisely so that he

need never leave them alone again, but can be present to them whenever and wherever they are, the limits and constraints of bodily existence in the world (where some of us may try to be in more than one place at once, or have diaries that require us to be, but *cannot* be) having been suspended by his return to 'be with the Father'. And, if Jesus was now truly 'with the Father', then what more natural than that they should rush back to Jerusalem and spend their days in the temple, that concrete symbolic focus of God's presence in which heaven and earth were believed to meet and interpenetrate? Again, the symbolic force of all this talk of coming and going and being with is what matters, not the geometry or geography.

We'll return to that thought in a moment. But first it may be worth noting something further about this question of Jesus' presence and absence. It's not uncommon for people to say things like: 'it would be much easier for me to believe in Jesus if I could actually meet him in the flesh', or 'it was okay for the disciples and others who saw Jesus doing things and heard him teaching. It's much more difficult for us, who

only have stories about him to rely on'. Perhaps we've sometimes felt something similar ourselves. Didn't the disciples have an unfair advantage over the rest



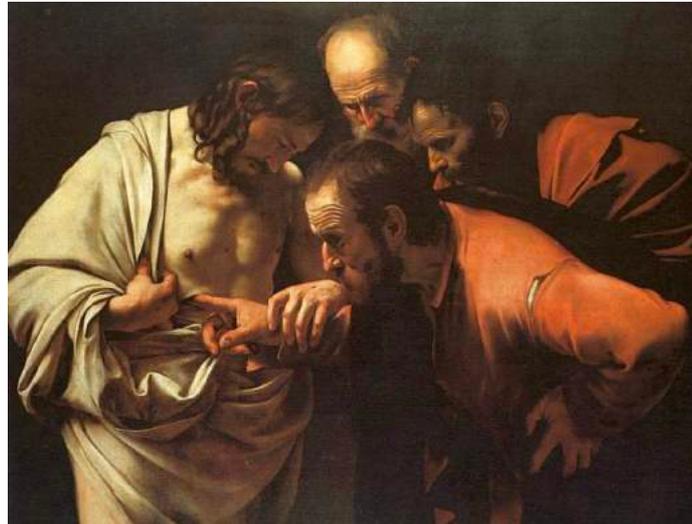
of us. Well, they had a particular job to do, which was to bear eye-witness testimony to what they had seen and heard. But the suggestion that being there 'in the flesh' was necessarily any sort of advantage as far as hearing and seeing the reality of what was going on in Jesus ought to be dispelled by the slightest reflection on it. The disciples themselves, who spent hours every day in Jesus' presence, were clearly blind and deaf to that reality much of the time, even when Jesus took them aside and spelled it out for them. What they lacked was precisely 'eyes to see and ears to hear', and the matter was far worse with the crowds, let alone the Pharisees and scribes and teachers of the law.



As the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard pointed out long ago, where the faith that discerns God's presence and activity in Jesus is concerned, flesh and blood encounter with Jesus himself was quite clearly no advantage at all. Such faith (the faith that opens eyes and unstops ears and enables us to grasp what is going on in Jesus) is a gift of God's Spirit. Without that gift, without the work of God *within* us to accompany the work of God alongside or in front of us, we shall never grasp its meaning, and nor would or could the disciples have done so. The simple human realities of Jesus' life as such, odd though they were in all sorts of ways, did not suffice to convince anyone that here was the Son of God at work for the sake of our redemption. Such things are not patient of explicit, in your face, unequivocal, cannot possibly be overlooked or denied presentation. They belong to a deeper level of things and require a deeper sort of 'seeing' than that provided by the retina and optic nerve. And for that sort of 'seeing' and 'hearing' to occur, what matters is the work of God, of God's Spirit, of the Spirit of Christ himself present in us and at work in us. It is a God-enabled response to the deeper realities of what Jesus did, and said, and the things that happened to him. And for it to occur, we do not need to have been present there in the dust and the sun and the flies of rural Palestine at all. God has engineered things in such a way that only a handful of all those humans who have ever lived and for whom Christ's life and work have redemptive meaning were able to be present there and then (and of those, as we've just reminded ourselves, most continued wholly undisturbed and none the wiser about what they saw and heard). For more or less every person who has ever lived, therefore, the response of faith comes not by seeing and hearing and touching the Word of Life (as John tells us the apostles certainly had - see John 1:14; 1 John 1:1), but through the story of Jesus being told, by the stories about Jesus being narrated, by witness to Jesus being borne and transmitted within and by the community of those who have come to believe in him. It has always been like that, and in reality few of us would probably wish to swap places with the apostles in their task of getting the ball rolling!

We could unpack this in an even more theologically refined manner, and insist that the process by which anyone is drawn into the life of faith is a fully Trinitarian one, the Father having sent his Son into the world, the Son living out the human reality of his life, death and resurrection and through it offering our humanity to the Father, and the Spirit working in the church and in us to kindle in us the response of faith which alone grasps the reality of what has happened. But we mustn't allow that slightly more abstract way of putting it to lose sight of the story of Jesus, as though there were some 'spirituality' summoned forth by God which is of a more vague and less precisely defined sort. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and the faith which the Spirit enables is always a response to the Jesus we meet in the gospels. Another way of putting this might be to say that the Risen and Ascended Lord is none other than the same Jesus who

encountered the disciples in the garden and the upper room, and he was recognized by them as the same one they had lived with and eaten with and travelled with for three years or more before he was arrested and put to death. It is the particular things that Jesus

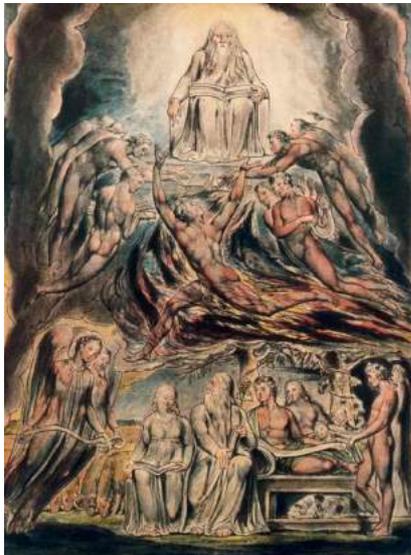


did, and said, and suffered, in other words, and the 'person' that we meet in the telling of the stories about these things, that are the touchstone of Christian faith. It is this same Jesus who is present to us and with us and in us by his Spirit, and not some other. And 'spiritual' experiences which have no direct bearings in the gospel stories about Jesus are not 'spiritual' in the sense that the New Testament uses that term (i.e., of things proper to and summoned forth by God's Spirit who is the Spirit of Jesus), whatever else we may wish to say about them.

Let's return now, then, to the fact that the apostles, in the immediate wake of Jesus' departure to be with his Father, 'worshipped him ... and they were continually in the temple blessing God' (Luke 24:53-4). And let me pick up again the point I made

earlier, that Jesus was understood not to be absent from them but, even though no longer present with them in flesh and blood (in the time and space of our embodied existence), was now present to them and with them and in them, *in precisely the way that God was and is*. To grasp this, and to grasp the implications of what is being said when, with the New Testament, we say that Jesus ‘ascended’ and is now ‘seated at the Father’s right hand’, helps us to see in this creedal claim not an otherwise odd and awkward appendage to the story of Jesus but instead its proper completion and, as the writer to the Hebrews suggests, as having to do with the very sheet-anchor of our faith as Christians (Heb. 6:19-20). If the previous few clauses deal with Jesus’ saving person and work ‘there and then’, then this one has everything to do with his continuing work for us and in us and in the world.

The Jewish Bible characteristically pictures God as seated on the throne of the universe, all things being under his dominion. As creator of all things, God is also Lord of all things and, as such, God alone is deserving of worship. The imagery of a throne room and a throne on which God sits is, of course, borrowed from Near



Eastern politics, where kings and emperors held court, and ruled from their throne rooms. As an extension of this imagery, the idea of someone ‘seated at the right hand’ of the throne suggests someone to whom God has granted special status and special favour, a dignitary able, perhaps, to exercise some of God’s authority on God’s behalf, as a vizier or prime minister might be supposed to do. This image, too, is found in the Old Testament in Psalm 110.1: ‘The LORD says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I

make your enemies your footstool’. This text clearly became very important in the early church, as it occurs (referring to Jesus’ exaltation by his Father) or is alluded to more than twenty times, far more than any other Old Testament text. And it is the source, of course, of this image in our creedal clause. Jesus has now been exalted to ‘the Father’s right hand’. But, while this might be understood as referring to a creature to whom special privilege and status has been granted, the way the New

Testament writers actually interpret it is radically different. Remember – a fundamental premise of Judaism in New Testament times (as in the Old Testament itself) was that God and God alone could be said to have created all things, and so to rule over all things. That was what distinguished God from anything and everything else. Angels, and even other ‘gods’ (if there were such) were included among the ‘all things’ over which God ruled by right, because God had created them. *Only God* rules over all things and does so from a throne that is exalted above all things. That is what distinguishes God *as God* (though lots of other things, of course, need to be said about this God). When, therefore, New Testament writers say of Jesus, as they often do, that by virtue of his exaltation and ascension he now rules over *all things* (e.g. Mt. 11:27; John 3:35; Phil.

3:21; Col. 3:20; Heb. 1:2) the indication to any Jewish reader is clear: this is not simply someone exalted to a very special status, but remaining on the creaturely side of the vital distinction between Creator and creature –



this is God himself, one who rules with God and as God from the divine throne which is above all things. So, for instance, Ephesians 1:21-2 states: ‘[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet’. Such texts, together with texts that ascribe to Jesus a direct sharing in the creating and sustaining of ‘all things’ (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16-7) make it clear that Jesus is here not simply being situated ‘alongside’ God, but is being identified *as* God, as included ‘within the unique divine identity’ as Richard Bauckham puts it. This is what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is at pains to insist in the opening verses of his first chapter: the one through whom God has made himself known is a Son who is himself the Creator and sustainer of all things and so the ‘heir’ of all things, by comparison with whom even the most exalted among the angels pale into insignificance, *because he is God and they are not!*

This, then, is what lies behind and fills with its content the terse creedal formula according to which Jesus, having ascended into heaven, is now 'seated at the right hand of the Father'. It is a theological bookend, corresponding to 'conceived by the Holy Spirit', and reiterating the identity of the one who enters history in that way as no mere creature (let alone a mere man), but the one already identified as the Maker of heaven and earth.

What is it, then, that we are to think of Jesus doing at the Father's right hand? And why is this biblical insistence on his situation there, as I suggested earlier, the sheet anchor of Christian faith?

First, because it tells us in no uncertain terms that Jesus is Lord. In fact, that statement ('Jesus is Lord') is one of the earliest and most basic Christian professions of faith, cropping up time and again in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:11). And what it means is clear enough in the light of these other biblical affirmations about Jesus' present status and role. Jesus is none other than God himself. It is Jesus who rules over all things in heaven and on earth. It is Jesus in whose hands the direction and the destiny of the world and its history rests. That's good news, because we know Jesus and we know his character, and frankly it's hard to imagine anyone better into whose hands we would want all things to be entrusted. Of course, the evidence of history itself often hardly suggests that Jesus is Lord, any more than the evidence of the cross suggested that he was indeed Israel's



king. His Lordship is, for now, veiled and hidden. But all power is indeed properly his, and he will return to claim and to reveal it. That is the claim and the hope of those who confess him as Lord. God will bring history to its proper end, and the God Christians believe in is exactly like Jesus, because Jesus is God.

But confessing Jesus as Lord is not simply a matter of imaginative projection into the future, when the kingdom of God (which is precisely the same as the Lordship of Jesus the King) will be heralded in. Confessing Jesus as Lord is also a matter of allowing him to be Lord, to rule in our lives. It is an acknowledgment that, even if for now other powers and dominions have their day, the rightful dominion is already his, and should be acknowledged and owned by all who know it. Christians are like those who know themselves to be the rightful subjects of a king temporarily exiled, but awaiting his return to claim the throne and the land that is properly his; and who, in the meanwhile, refuse to bow the knee, refuse to live in accordance with the dictates and policies of the powers that be, living instead in accordance with the kingdom of the one who is still to come, creating pockets of resistance to the rule of the here and now, and working ceaselessly to see the true king's reign restored and fulfilled.



Christians know themselves, like Jesus himself, in the language of John's Gospel, to be in the world, but not of it, their citizenship, their allegiance, their fealty, lying with another.

Or, we might switch metaphors and with the apostle Paul suggest that the church is a sort of colony in the midst of an alien nation – a colony of heaven found on earth. Paul himself was a Roman citizen, and Philippi was an outpost of Roman Empire in Macedonia which, like most such outposts, was home not just to the locals and a barracks full of Roman soldiers to keep them in order, but a little colony of Roman men, women and children who spoke Latin rather than the local mumbo-jumbo, dressed in whatever the current Roman fashion was, and generally sought to maintain Roman customs and culture alive in order to civilize wherever it was they happened to find themselves. For them, too, 'home' was somewhere else than 'here', somewhere they looked forward to returning to, somewhere, in the meanwhile, they sought to keep alive by every means at their disposal. And so Paul enjoins Christian believers in Philippi to do the same: Remember, he tells them, that 'we are citizens of

heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phil. 3:20). So, don't get seduced by the customs and standards of the locals (the 'world'), but maintain your citizenship by living it out. And again, to the Christians in Colossae (another Roman outpost, this time in Asia Minor) he writes: 'seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth' (Col. 3:1-2).

So, then, that Jesus is Lord ('seated at the right hand of God') is both a matter of hope and expectancy, and a driver of Christian life and discipleship. It is Jesus, who 'bodied God's character forth' in the world (to misquote Shakespeare), and who left us plenty of teaching to be getting on with, whose character and teaching show us what sort of shape and direction human life ought to take if it would be in step rather than out of kilter with the grain of the cosmos, and it is Jesus to whom human history and what it has made of the world will finally be answerable.



Finally, we need to mention something left unsaid so far, namely, that in ascending to the Father there is no suggestion that the Son of God *sheds* the humanity that he has assumed, as though the incarnation (and the union of God's life and ours that it entails) is merely a temporary episode in God's story. On the contrary, it is precisely Jesus, and our humanity with him, that is exalted to the Father's right hand, and this means we must say the almost unsayable and picture the unimaginable – that the man Jesus is now wherever God is, and our humanity is, in him, exalted, and sharing in the glory of God that is rightfully his. Again, we need not and ought not to get hung up on the spatial and temporal complexities of this. The words merely point, and point inadequately, to the reality of the circumstance. God has united us to himself in his Son, and that union remains in place, God sharing our human creature-hood now for eternity. But there is more

to it than this. The writer to the Hebrews in particular draws our attention to the link between the ascension and Jesus' humanity. And he does so by referring us to the ancient religious ritual of Israel when, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies bearing the names of all the tribes of Israel on the breastplate of his priestly costume, and so symbolically carrying the whole people with him into God's holy presence and interceding on their behalf for the forgiveness of their sins. We should understand this, the author indicates, as a symbolic foreshadowing of what was to happen when, having suffered and died for our sins, the one who is the true High Priest not just of Israel but of all humankind bore us with him (being clothed in our humanity, with our name all over it) not into the temple, but into God's very presence, ascending to God's right hand in order to pray for us, in order to offer worship to the Father on our behalf (see Hebrews 8 and 9).

There is enough here to keep a whole gaggle of theologians busy for a very long time indeed. But the basic point is clear and is vitally important. Not only is Jesus Lord, the one who is in authority over all things, and who lays claim, therefore to every area of our lives and calls us to dedicate them to him as an act of worship. Jesus is also the one who unites us to himself in order to bring us to his Father, and in the Father's presence he intercedes for us, commending us to the Father, and, as a man, offering the perfect human worship to the Father that we, with all our sin and failings and weakness, can never offer. Worship, in other words, is not something that we are called to bring to God in response to all that God has done and continues to do for us, let alone something we do to keep 'our side' of some putative bargain with God. If that were the case, pure and simple, we should have every reason to be anxious, and for worship to be an oppressive and joyless occasion over which the cloud of our failure to do it well enough, or to 'feel' the right sorts of thing would constantly hang over us, leaving us with every reason to suppose that our offering, like Cain's in Genesis chapter 4, is in reality unfit and likely to fall short in God's sight. But that's not how it is. According to Hebrews, worship isn't first and foremost something that we are called to bring to God. First and foremost it is something that is *already* happening *in* God, as the Father loves the Son and the Son

loves the Father in the power of the Spirit. And now, since Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand, this same worship finds its perfect *human* expression, *not* in us and what *we* do (on Sundays, or in our lives more generally), but in *Jesus*, who offers his own humanity to the Father in love and devotion, and who hears the Father's words (not limited to the occasion of his baptism) 'you are my beloved Son, in you I am well-pleased'. But, because worship *is* also something *we* are called to do (not just on Sundays, but from moment to waking moment through the offering of our whole selves to our Father), and because Jesus has united us to himself by taking our humanity, what this means is that worship is an *invitation* extended to us *to join in*



the human Son's worship of his heavenly Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It's a party already well underway in God when we arrive, and we are invited to join it and to enjoy it! In such a circumstance, in the light of such a realization, all fear and sense of inadequacy can fall away, and we can worship gladly and joyfully, knowing, as we do, that any shortfall in what we bring or what we do is more than made good by Jesus' own offering made on our behalf. He's our brother, as well as our Lord, and he brings us home, like the estranged prodigal son in the parable he himself told, to enjoy being in the presence of our Father.