

Sermon for Evensong on the 14th Sunday after Trinity, 28th August 2016

Isaiah 33:13-22, John 3:22-36 - Touching the Face of God

'He shall dwell on high', we read in the prophet Isaiah (33:16), and John the Baptist said, 'He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all.' (John 3:31)

What is it like in heaven? We talk about heaven and earth. We make a distinction between earthly things and heavenly things. And perhaps we think that, somehow, the higher you go, the nearer you get to God.

A week ago it was the 75th anniversary of the publication of that wonderful poem called 'High Flight', by the Spitfire pilot, John Gillespie Magee.

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, --and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of --Wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark or even eagle flew --
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

In 1941, Magee had flown his Spitfire to 31,000 feet. He wrote the poem on the back of an envelope:

*'... I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.'*

It is every pilot's favourite poem. God is high, high up there. We will pray, 'O Lord and heavenly father, high and mighty, King of kings, ...' High, high and mighty. In the liturgy, God is the king of heaven. 'High' is the adjective not just meaning tall, but also, metonymically, 'important', 'high-ranking', 'leading'.

I think we would all acknowledge that God isn't really a kindly-looking old man with a beard, living above the clouds. When John Magee's Spitfire was flying

miles above the earth, and he 'put out [his] hand, and touched the face of God', we need not worry about whether God avoided a close shave - literally - with the Spitfire's propeller. The idea of a place, away from, above, the world we live in, where God the creator, or the various gods, say, in the Hellenic tradition, goes back to the earliest forms of civilisation. But it isn't meant to be taken literally. God is not confined, not limited to one place, however exalted.

In the metaphor, though, as well as God on high, there is a nether region, another place. Down, but not literally - not to Australia. Heaven, where the good people go, is up there. Hell, the other place, is down, down below. Think of Dives and Lazarus, Jesus' parable of the rich man and the crippled beggar (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus the beggar goes up to heaven, and Dives goes down to Sheol, Hades, the realm of the dead. Hell is also supposed to be a furnace. The sinners who end up there are burned. As Isaiah says: 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' (33:14) God puts people to the test, the test of refining fire.

It's a graphic way of imagining the awesome power of God. According to Isaiah, unless you live virtuously, you will end up in the fires of Hell. Who will be able to come through the testing in the fire? The answer: 'He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.' (33:15)

And then Isaiah paints a picture of the place where these virtuous people end up after they have passed through the testing fire:

'Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken.

But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.' (33:20-21)

The city of God; 'Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion city of our God'. These are lovely pictures, perhaps the best we can do with our limited understanding, to imagine the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom of Heaven.

But there is a problem. The problem is that this beautiful vision is so far removed from our daily life, that no-one these days really takes any notice of it. As John the Baptist says about Jesus, 'And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony.' (John 3:32)

A prophet is without honour, indeed. There was Jesus, who was God, there in front of them, not a metaphorical figure: someone who'd been there, in that heaven, and was telling everyone who listened to him about it - but his testimony was not believed - at least not according to John the Baptist.

That's strange. Surely Jesus was surrounded by big crowds, most of whom presumably would have described themselves as followers. Maybe this is like what people say about Jeremy Corbyn. He certainly attracts great crowds - but people say that, when the general election comes, he won't get the votes from the electorate as a whole, as opposed to just his followers.

I couldn't speculate on whether that's a correct view, in Mr Corbyn's case, but I wonder whether it was what John the Baptist thought about Jesus. 'No man receiveth his testimony': did John think that the craze for following Jesus was just a local thing, just that, a craze?

'No man receiveth his testimony'. Testimony is what a witness gives in court, evidence. Why would people be reluctant to believe Jesus' evidence? I suspect that there could be different answers, depending whether you're talking about people then, contemporaries of Jesus, 2,000 years ago, and people today. 2,000 years ago the people who refused to believe Jesus were other Jews, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. For them Jesus' teaching wasn't convenient. He challenged them in all sorts of ways, accusing them of hypocrisy, challenging the trappings of their piety - having the best places in the synagogue, for instance. But He told them that the first would be last in his kingdom. Not what they wanted to hear.

The problem today is that people don't so much positively resist Jesus' teaching, as ignore it altogether. John the Baptist taught his followers that, if anyone did accept what Jesus said as being true, that it was real evidence, then they had taken to heart the very words of God himself. God had given Jesus the words, his words. 'He whom God sent utters the words of God, so measureless is God's gift of the Spirit.'

It takes God away from the world of picturesque metaphors, from the heights of heaven. In Jesus, God is right there in front of us. Well, I ought to have said, God was right there in front of them. Them, not us. Jesus recognised the struggle we would have, when he appeared to Doubting Thomas. He said to Thomas, 'Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith'. (John 20:29)

So for many people, it's just a distant, academic thing. 'Jesus gave evidence about heaven. He was talking about what he had witnessed with his own eyes'. Really? Come on, they say: it's too far-fetched.

John the Baptist, like Isaiah, thought that there would be a Last Judgement, that there were big penalties awaiting anyone who did ignore Jesus', or the prophet's, words of God. For the believer, 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.'

We tend to downplay the hell-fire and damnation aspect these days. But what do you think? It's not so long, in evolutionary terms, since John Magee made his High Flight, and 'touched the face of God'. God is still there - maybe not just up there. I think the hymn has it right.

For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies, ... (Folliot S. Pierpoint, Common Praise No 253)

God is still with us; in the beauties of creation: in love, which you can find over and around us. Over, indeed; but also all around us. Let's not be blind to Him.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant