

Stretching those Wings

A sermon for the Feast of the Ascension by Nathan Nettleton, 13 May 2021

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Message

Christ is always stretching the boundaries beyond what we can comprehend, and his ascension stretches his presence to encompass even what seem to us to be his absence.

Sermon

Do you remember the olden days when we used to go to airports? I'm sure some of you are old enough to remember life before the pandemic when we used to go to airports and fly off to other parts of the world, leaving friends and family tearfully waving at the departure gates and watching us disappear off into the sky. Remember that?

My family of origin was never big on dramatic farewells, but my wife's family seem to love them. She and all her siblings have been overseas several times, and often for extended periods, and they seem to have an unspoken rule that as many as possible have to turn up at the airport, and the same again whenever one of them returns.

But even though it seems a little excessive to me, whenever I was at the airport with them, back in the old days when we did that sort of thing, I was aware that there were always other families doing it in even more dramatic fashion, with floods of tears and endless clinging hugs and weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. And of course, in at least some of those cases, it would be perfectly understandable if only I knew the stories behind the departures I was witnessing.

In some of them, perhaps a young adult who had never left home before was heading off overseas and wouldn't be back for a couple of years at least. In others, a family unit was emigrating, leaving behind grandparents and siblings and cousins, and contact that had been close and regular would now be reduced to letters and emails and phone calls and a visit every five years or so. We didn't really know about Zoom calls back in the olden days. In other cases, it might have been that people were farewelling a loved one who they knew they would never see again. The emotion and tears were understandable, and so are the awful aching feelings of emptiness afterwards, when the parting is complete, the plane has disappeared into the clouds, and there is nothing to do but go home feeling like your heart has been ripped out.

There must have been something of all that in the experience of the disciples when Jesus was carried off into heaven. No matter how much he reassured them about the imminent arrival of the Holy Spirit, or how much he promised that he was only a prayer away, or how clearly he spelled out that he would be with them always, even to the end of the age, it wasn't going to be the same anymore. The Jesus they had known face to face, and walked and talked and ate and laughed with, was not going to be with them that way anymore.

I don't blame them for standing there, rooted to the spot, staring dumbly into the sky. What they had so enjoyed was over. They had been almost inseparable for three years, and then he had been taken away and killed, and then everything they had ever known and believed was turned on its head as they got him back again, but now, forty days later, he was going away again. And this time he wasn't just ducking off for the long weekend. This time it was the full

flood of tears at the airport, end of an era, nothing to hold on to, parting. And they were left standing there, blinking dumbly into the sky, wondering what on earth to do now.

And don't we often feel a lot like that about our relationship to Jesus? No doubt this story was included in our scriptures because followers of Jesus in every age relate to it and recognise themselves in it. However much we try to reassure ourselves that we have a close personal relationship with Jesus, there is much of the time when it feels anything but close. There is much of the time when, at best, it feels like an other-side-of-the-world, letters-and-emails kind of relationship.

But maybe we are taking our own experience a bit too much at face value here. Maybe we are trying to read our relationship with Jesus too much through the lens of the other relationships that we know about, and while that is valuable up to a point, it runs into some problems when we are dealing with Jesus.

Our own experience tells us that when you see someone killed and buried, that is the end of the story, but with Jesus that proves not to be the case. With Jesus, the boundaries of what is possible are always being stretched, or even torn open. With Jesus, things that appear to be impossible become possible, and apparently irreconcilable opposites become reconciled. Jesus seems able to stretch his wings to gather in things that seemed so far apart that nothing could ever reach them.

We see this pattern especially in the way he embraces people who we imagine to be beyond the pale and reconciles them into one body. We are frequently scandalised by this. Parables like the prodigal son's older brother, and the full-day workers who got paid the same as the one hour workers, remind us that the extravagance of God's grace frequently angers and offends us. It can't be fair. Such outrageous generosity and mercy surely cannot be reconciled with the demands of justice, can they? Or can they?

I think something a little like this is at work in the ascension of Jesus too. To our minds, absence and presence are opposites. Even with the technological wonders of the internet and Zoom conferencing, we are not fooled. Absence is absence, and our brains try to defend that clarity. The experts say that one of the reasons that some people find Zoom meetings so exhausting is that our brains get stressed and fatigued by the effort of trying to reconcile treating someone as though they were present when it is simultaneously clear that they are not.

No matter how convincing the technological illusion is, no one can be both absent and yet present at the same time. It's impossible. But is anything impossible for God? If the comprehensively dead can be raised and be even more alive than ever before, then maybe absence and presence are not as irreconcilable as we imagine.

Indeed, I believe that that is part of the message of the placement of this feast of Ascension. The season of Pascha, or Easter, is not forty days which close with Ascension. It is fifty days with Ascension as a stage along the way. We are not celebrating forty days of the risen Christ being with us and then he's gone. Instead Ascension is a part of our ongoing celebration of the risen Christ's presence with us. How can this be? Let me try a kind of physical spatial image for you.

Rather than taking off for some other place and becoming absent from our place, it is as though Jesus has instead gotten bigger. Just as in his relating to people he has kept stretching and stretching his wings to gather in all sorts of irreconcilable people, now he is stretching and stretching the boundaries of his own presence.

While walking the streets as one of us, he could only be in one place at a time, but is that still the case? Well in way perhaps it is, but perhaps he has expanded his presence to such an extraordinary extent that the one place where he is present is now bigger than all the places we could possibly go. Now instead of occupying one place in the universe, the universe occupies one place in Christ.

Without wanting to start an argument here about the rights or wrongs of our various practices during lockdown, this was actually part of the theological argument that some used to justify celebrating the Eucharist online. They weren't disputing that we must be physically gathered as one body in Christ to celebrate Eucharist, they were just asking whether the body of Christ had now stretched so far that multiple remote geographic locations could be understood to be well and truly within the one gathered body of Christ.

So if instead of Christ occupying one place in the universe, the universe now occupies one place in Christ, then we can no longer stand back far enough to see him, and that's another one of those perception challenges that stresses our brains. Our brains try to un-confuse themselves by forcing this experience into one category or the other. So we often perceive it as Christ's absence, because our brains want to interpret absence and presence through categories we know and understand from the absence or presence of other people.

That perception of absence is a real experience and it needs to be taken seriously as part of our struggle to be the people God would have us be. But just because the experience is real, doesn't mean our perception of it is accurate. Part of the journey of healing and growth into the full likeness of Jesus, the full destiny for which we were all created, is to begin to live into this bewildering paradox of knowing the presence of the risen messiah who seems absent to all our sensory faculties, but who yet is more all-embracingly present than ever.

The gracious wings that have stretched out to reach even us, have stretched out to reconcile even absence and presence. As one of the Celtic prayers from the Abbey of Iona puts it, Christ has ascended into heaven to be everywhere present. Not to leave us behind as he goes off to enjoy some distant heaven, but to fill the heaven that is all around us, so that as the psalmist put it, whether I fly towards the dawn or plunge down to the depths of the earth, even there I find I am still in your hands.

This is the great mystery we celebrate this night. Even when Jesus is indisputably dead, yet behold, he is more alive than any of us. And even when he departs, behold he is present with us, stretching his wing still to embrace us all in the glorious love and grace of God.
Hallelujah!