

21 MAY 2020

Look up
Acts 1:1-11

You can't have attended many Ascension Day services without having heard the preacher refer to old pictures, or stained glass windows, depicting the soles of two feet going up into a cloud as a representation of the ascension of our Lord. A quick internet search produced this modern woodcut as the closest thing I could find.

It has the merit of being recognisable and charming in a quaint sort of way, but it immediately raises the question, "Was it really like that?", which, at first glance seems rather improbable. Thinking about it, though, it seems to me that it does hint at a deeper truth.

The most notable thing about the image, apart from the improbable feet, is the fact that the huddled folk are all looking up, away from the everyday background scene of what looks like an industrial urban landscape and towards the heavens which, though obscured by the layer of cloud, yet offers a hint, a glimpse of the divine. It roots the Ascension in the long list of biblical instances of 'thin places', where, not so much that the divine and the everyday draw close together, for they are, in truth, always coterminous, but instances where the human participants see the reality of this closeness. Other obvious New Testament examples are the Annunciation, when Gabriel visits Mary, the carolling angels above the fields outside Bethlehem where the shepherds are keeping their sheep, the visit of the magi to the stable, the Transfiguration, but, as I have often said before, such 'thin places' are encountered much more widely than in the pages of scripture; they have been known throughout recorded human history, and many can testify to them today.



These thin place experiences are not a repudiation of the everyday, but they are an affirmation that the everyday is not all that there is. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are told to stop gazing up at the heavens and get on with the everyday, but they go to that task emboldened by what they have glimpsed, knowing that the everyday can be transformed.

So this Ascension Day, when the everyday for all of us has taken a turn that few of us can ever have expected to see, and which for some has led to misery and profound loss, we can, like those disciples, allow ourselves to look up and glimpse God standing with us in the midst of both the humdrum and the misery of our everyday, before returning to our 'normal' lives reassured that He is with us, no matter what befalls.

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