

Views from the Pews: The Ascension

The small Church of England primary school in rural Kent which I attended began and ended each day with prayers that generally didn't mean much to us. The best thing about it was that we always got Ascension Day off.

Few modern congregations, or their critics, understand the theology of the Ascension any more than we did then. The simple story we learned then, about a grown man, dead and buried only six weeks before, returning to his friends only to climb into the sky on a cloud, still appears in our liturgy. It looks to outsiders like an irrational medieval myth. But that view underestimates the serious value of mythical stories as truth-bearing metaphors.

Science is also a system of non-literal metaphors, expressing complex truths that can best be contained in apparently irrational stories. Quantum physicists tell us that, at the subatomic level, all the hard objects around us, like the pew on which you are sitting, are mostly made of empty space. The metaphor they offer is that all matter is constructed from atoms, visualised as collections of miniscule particles whizzing around each other like miniature solar systems with lots of space within their orbits. We can't perceive the spaces, because any solid object contains such immeasurably huge numbers of atoms held together by electromagnetism that their individual structures and interactions blur together into a dense mass. (Like the way the fur on a dog's back forms a dense waterproof coat, rather than a collection of separate hairs with spaces between them). People familiar with a simple outline of quantum physics can accept this analogy as a weird but valid metaphor of the mysterious structure of reality.

Fruitful metaphors are those that lead to new thinking, and to paradoxical new ideas. Both science and theology are full of them, and both really do lead to beyond-rational new perceptions. Therefore, a metaphor illustrating a counter-intuitive theological mystery should be no less believable than a scientific one.

When carefully unwrapped, the ascension story in Luke/Acts becomes a fruitful metaphor for a new mystery about how Jesus, in ways we cannot describe, is gone, but not gone. The Ascension story is about much more than a simple physical or spiritual relocation. Rather, as Paul understood his encounter with the risen Christ *after* the Ascension, it confirms Jesus' promise to be with us always.

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