

Today is Ascension Day, and we remember the Risen Jesus being lifted bodily into heaven, in front of the disciples. It is hard for a 21st-century person to understand that? It seems to be about boundaries? Jesus' life seems to be full of boundary crossing, socially and physically. His birth was the divine becoming human, through human pregnancy and birth; heaven becomes tangible and earthly. Jesus' baptism was one of air and water, a passing from one to the other. Life-and-death boundaries are echoed in the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus himself causes others to cross them by the raising of Lazarus and others, back to life from death. Today, we remember Jesus crossing from Earth to Heaven.

Boundaries are fascinating places. If you go to the seaside then the boundary between sea and land is in our minds and experience. We can imagine going from one to the other, but the physical experience is beyond our imaginations. When we physically go into the water we never imagine it's going to be as cold as it really is! We can't change that, it is in the nature of seawater. If the waves are high we can never imagine the shock of a big wave catching us out and even, momentarily, sweeping us under? But it will happen eventually! We cough and splutter and spit out the seawater, but we never imagined doing it beforehand?

Boundaries are mysterious places where our minds meet the reality of experience and difference. No matter how much we imagine it, we cannot walk into the sea, with no breathing apparatus on, and survive. Nor can we cross into heaven simply by wanting to. Jesus crosses the boundaries of reality when he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. They leave us with the question, "what is real?" Our normal methods of science, rational thinking and analysis are no longer helpful because the nature of reality turns out to be different to what we are expecting. We have no way of approaching understanding it? There is mystery; what is human, what is divine, what is death, what is heaven? We are left with faith alone.

When we read the Gospels there is something of this boundary crossing going on in the whole shape of the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke have divine to human boundary-crossing births but we don't find those in Mark or John. In Mark's gospel Jesus comes out of nowhere. He emerges from the crowds to see John and be baptised and the next thing we learn as he passes from 'air to water to air' is that God the Father names him as his own Son and the Spirit, as a dove, flies over water of baptism! So there is also a heaven to earth boundary crossed.

We are back to boundaries again as Jesus is 'driven' from the water of baptism into the heat and life endangering terror of the desert. Did Jesus know what was going to happen when he came to see John? Did he know he was the son of God? In the desert Jesus is confronted by spiritual beings: almost as if he has passed from Earth himself? But then he crosses back out, to an oasis of water, and his earthly ministry begins. Does he know where it's all going to end? There is the fame and the adulation to begin with, and then having to head for the final showdown in Jerusalem with the Priestley authorities, to the amazement and horror of his disciples.

As Jesus gets near to that final showdown he performs more and more miracles and gives more signs that demonstrate to the world, and also to himself, that he seems to be much more than just an ordinary human being. But Jesus never becomes detached from his humanity. If Jesus had realised that he had the power of God at his command and he could therefore walk away from being human, it would rob the cross of its significance. A God could easily face the cross because they would know that ultimately everything would be okay? It would demean humanity as being too weak in spirit to show the nobility of self-sacrifice?

In the Garden of Gethsemane we meet a Jesus who is very human and incredibly courageous. He seems to feel weak and terrified? He is “distressed and agitated” and he says, “I’m deeply grieved, even to death” (Mk 14:13-42).

“He threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.” “The spirit is indeed willing but the flesh is weak”, Jesus says.

This is a human Jesus who is full of God and the power of the Spirit but who is not untouched by human suffering. He is alone and afraid, wrestling with his human weaknesses. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus is all of us and we can recognise ourselves in his struggles. On the cross Jesus cries out, “My God why have you forsaken me?” This is a human being who feels godforsaken, not a confident God dying, and knowing it’s all going to be fine. This is a human, innocent and frightened death. It is every human in their last hours. The boundary into death is unknown to him?

In Luke’s gospel and in his 2nd volume, Acts of the Apostles, we find the only accounts of the Ascension. The account at the end of Mark’s gospel is not accepted by scholars and is seen as a very much later addition. Jesus ascends, bodily, into heaven, but there are important boundary issues here as well. When Jesus rises from the dead he does not do so in the same human body that he died in. His Risen body bears the marks of the cross but is unhindered by them. Jesus has crossed from human life to Resurrection life, which is not more of the same. He lives in a new life and the nature of that life allows him to freely move between earth and heaven. The resurrection appearances, and disappearances, attest to that. He has already gone, but there is an echo which remains and gives the disciples vital encouragement and reassurance. We face complete mystery: nothing that can be easily rationalised in terms of modern day science.

What the Ascension says to us is that God is not indifferent, but is a God of love. This is not a God we can never come near or understand. Such a God is met every time we take a stranger by the hand or break bread together, because the boundary between God and humans has been opened for us. When we are open to the ‘other’, in love, then we cross the boundary between earth and heaven. We become open to God, who welcomes us.