

**Ascension - Up Words**  
**25 May 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**

*Acts 1:1-11*  
*Ephesians 1:15-23*  
*Luke 24:44-53*



[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)

I wonder if you've ever come across a board game called Upwords. This is a vertical or 3 dimensional form of Scrabble, which involves stacking the tiles upwards, as well as sideways. I'd be very happy to challenge any one to a game! I got to thinking about Up-words as we celebrate the Ascension of Christ, risen, ascended, glorified. I love the Ascension hymns, and we're certainly getting our full ration of them tonight. They are tremendously uplifting, and perhaps that's the cumulative effect of so many 'up' words in them.

For those for whom phone apps are more exciting than board games, I wonder if you have come across *Jesus Jump*: this is a game app where you have to make the risen Jesus bounce from cloud to cloud as he ascends to heaven – the downside is when you miss a cloud and he falls back to earth, and you're into theological disaster territory!

There are those, though, who would say that the Ascension itself is theological disaster territory, that surely we who no longer believe in a three-tier lift shaft style universe, with heaven, earth and 'the other place' all stacked on top of each other, can no longer subscribe to the idea of Jesus ascending at all.

There are also those of a scientific bent who have calculated that it would take Jesus several billion years, travelling at the speed of light to reach the edge of the known universe and enter some sort of transcendent realm beyond, and of course another several billion years to return.

It's interesting how easy we find it to resort to biblical literalism, or scientific literalism and miss the point of what is being proclaimed here by the writers of the New Testament and particularly Luke who gives us two accounts of the Ascension in Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11.

This is that the risen Jesus is exalted, glorified, triumphant, victorious over sin and death, the victory won at the cross that is vindicated in the resurrection.

The New Testament writers use *metaphor* to describe this, they use the language of the enthronement of kings which they found in Psalms such as Psalm 47: 'God has gone up with shouts of triumph, with a fanfare of trumpets'; Psalm 24: 'Lift up your heads you gates, lift yourselves up, you everlasting doors, that the King of Glory may come in'. This is the language of exaltation, of triumph.

If you think of the language you have used already today, I hope you will see the metaphors you have been using also: I'm feeling pretty *upbeat* today, what time did you get *up*? I'm on top of things, are you *up* to speed on this? she's at the peak of her career, this is a fine *upstanding* congregation we have here this evening...and that doesn't mean you have to stand up for the whole service!

But while we may understand that this language and much of the language of the Ascension is not directional, we may still feel a twinge of anxiety – isn't all this Ascension language rather triumphalistic? All this stuff about Christ enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, enthroned in glory over the nations, how come we don't see this in reality? Why is our world still in such a mess, why does it seem so often that Jesus has indeed 'shot through', disappeared off this planet and left us to our own devices? Isn't there a profound disconnect between the language of the Ascension and the tough reality of life in this world?

I think that is where I find comfort in some of the extraordinary artworks that have been painted of the Ascending Christ. On the one hand, perhaps they have contributed to our getting fixated on Jesus going up – some of them have a distinct 'Beam me up, Scotty' kind of look to them....others make it hard for us to keep a straight face as all we see are two feet poking out from a cloud.



St Mary's  
Halswell, Chch

But to me, those feet remind me that Jesus took our humanity with him in his ascension, he did not just ditch his humanity and float off into heaven like a disembodied spirit. Jesus' feet needed washing while they were on earth, his feet still bear the marks of the nails. Christ took our humanity into the realm and being of God, with his experience of living, suffering and dying on this earth.



Walsingham

As Archbishop Rowan Williams has put it, "Our humanity in all its variety, in all its vulnerability, has been taken by Jesus into the heart of the divine life...the humanity that we all know to be stained, wounded, imprisoned in various ways; this humanity - yours and mine - is still capable of being embraced by God, shot through with God's glory, received and welcomed in the burning heart of reality itself."

(sermon at Canterbury Cathedral, quoted in John Pridmore, The Word is very near you: Feasts and Festivals, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2010.)

This gives me confidence that the ascended Christ is interceding for us in ways that reflect his experience of life on earth. As Paul reminded the Romans (8:34-35), 'Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ?'

Christ as the Intercessor, the one who knows and shares our humanity, is one who is accessible to us, who will hear our prayers and the longings of our hearts. "Intercessor, friend of sinners, earth's Redeemer, plead for me..." ('Alleluia, Sing to Jesus!' William Chatterton Dix, CP 278)

And how does Christ intercede for us? We pray and Jesus prays for us. When we don't know how to pray for a person or situation, we can bring them in our heart and imagination before Jesus, interceding for us, Jesus who is both human and divine. When we struggle to know how to pray for our world and its people, to bring them before Jesus our intercessor is the best thing we can do, in the hope that as Alfred, Lord Tennyson said, More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.

This year our Archbishop of Canterbury has called for ten days of prayer between Ascension and Pentecost under the banner "Thy Kingdom Come", praying as we do in the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. We long that the values and attributes of God's reign of justice and peace, love and care may be visible on earth, in a world of so much suffering.

Our job then is to pray to our ascended Lord, Thy kingdom come, but also to try to be the answer to our prayer: to live out our lives as the body of Christ, seeking to live the reality of the ascended and reigning Christ *into* our world, that God's reign might come on earth as it is in heaven. As the church of today, we are often all too aware of our fragility and failings, our powerlessness and weariness. Hence we need to have on our hearts in this season of preparation for Pentecost, the ancient prayer 'Come Holy Spirit', where we pray for the strengthening presence of God's Spirit to be with us and abroad in the world God loves.

Let us pray as one of our NZ Prayer Book Collects invites us:

Eternal God, the king of glory,  
You have exalted your only Son with great triumph to be Lord of all;  
Leave us not comfortless but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us  
That we may work for the coming of your reign  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.