

Ascension Luke 24:44-end

I may regret telling you this, but I need to conjure up an image so that we can get where we need to be. At the beginning of the week, a leisurely Bank Holiday Monday ended in a trip to the theatre. You dress up for the theatre so the Dean of Bristol, in moleskin and cashmere walked up the stairs to the grand circle and noticed he was surrounded by small girls in party dresses and slightly bigger girls in very high heels. All of us were off to watch *Mamma Mia*. Now, being a cathedral congregation you will all have been at home reading sonnets or playing the harpsichord. So, I should explain that *Mamma Mia* is a musical set, to the songs of Abba. It would take more time than we have got to explain the plot and when I finished you would still be baffled. What you do need to know, the thing that brings all this to mind on Ascension Day, is that there is a song in *Mamma Mia* that describes the way that fate plays tricks on lovers. Specifically, the song says, the gods who play tricks on us.

This is painful enough already, I am not going to sing it, but the song is called *The Winner Takes it All* and includes the lines:

The gods may throw the dice. Their minds as cold as ice.

I think I was possibly the only person at *Mamma Mia* on Monday night who thought that was an interesting theological statement.

Let me explain. Just after Jesus died the Romans sent an army, under Titus to Jerusalem. Titus besieged the city and crucified anyone who tried to leave. He smashed his way into the city, destroyed the Temple and slaughtered his opponents. For this he was rewarded. Go to Rome and you can still see the Arch of Titus, near the Forum. At the top of the arch, there is an image of Titus flying up to heaven on the back of an eagle. Titus becoming a god.

This is the world of our New Testament and it was a world of gods. There were gods of harvest and gods of battle, gods of good luck, gods of love, gods of storm and sea. If good things happened, if you found a key you had lost, or made a fortune, it was because the gods decreed it. If bad things happened, if you got toothache, or your house was blown away by a typhoon, it was because the gods willed it. There was no rhyme or reason to these events; the gods were fickle, even faithless. Einstein famously told us that God does not play dice; he said that because he thought the world was rational. The Romans and Abba beg to differ. They precisely believed that the gods are whimsical.

The gods may throw the dice. Their minds as cold as ice.

In the world of late antiquity and in *Mamma Mia* the gods were unpredictable and irrational. Heaven and earth were muddled up and the outcome was confusing and frightening. All day, every day, you would worry about the gods and what they were going to do.

If that sounds quaint can I remind you that there are still plenty of people who think that the alignment of the stars, or the powers of crystals, will tell them things. We may not believe in Jupiter or Juno any more, but there are plenty of people who think that something called 'The Market' is what really governs us. There are plenty of people too who suggest that we get cancer or get run over because it was somehow 'meant to be'. The gods are alive and well.

Heaven and earth are set apart. Communication is fraught with difficulty. The truth about us and our destiny is mysterious and only partially accessible.

That is precisely the theology that Ascension Day overturns, there will be no Abba anthem today.

Our gospel reading had Jesus speak to the disciples

"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."

Words that I spoke while I was with you, notice that. Then, everything written about me in the law...must be fulfilled. Again and again in Luke's gospel you get this steady insistence that the story is always the same. What Jesus said once, he still says. What was written in the Old Testament is still true. The explanations hold good forever.

We picture the ascension and think, God help us, of a pair of feet disappearing into a cloud. We lose Jesus into the heavens and we get a pain in the neck for our troubles. That is not the image Luke leaves us with.

[the disciples] worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

In Luke the stress is on *continuity*, they go back to the city they already knew.

Last year on study leave I came across a picture of a beautiful little ivory carved in Rome, or Milan round about the year 400 AD. The ivory combines two stories we know. Bottom left is a picture of the empty tomb. The women, the two soldiers, the angel who says to them,

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5).

In the top corner is the second scene. Christ strides up a hillside, his cloak billows behind him. His right hand is extended and he grasps the hand of God that emerges from a cloud. This is the ascension, and it is the same story as the resurrection. The risen life of Jesus, the story about him eating and being seen and touched; that story, includes the ascension. In those two clasped hands, heaven meets earth. At the ascension the human life of Jesus is joined to the life of the Father, taken not just into heaven, but into the heart of God.

That is what we are celebrating today, human life is now inseparable from the life of God. As Rowan Williams puts it,

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

I am sorry I have to be the man to tell you this, but Abba got it wrong. Human life is not a toy for the gods to play with. Humanity and divinity do not exist in parallel. Jesus has lifted us into the life of God.

Jesus was not promoted, like Titus, into glory. Jesus doesn't go up into the sky as though suddenly he will be up there and not down here. It is not a story about Jesus having been here and suddenly being *there*. It is about the fact that there will never quite be *here* and *there* again.

Tonight your life and mine and the lives of little girls in party dresses and bigger girls in tottering heels are lifted into the deeper, loving, merciful reality of God. Rowan Williams imagines Jesus, in his humanity, coming to the Father and saying

'This is the humanity I have brought home. It's not a pretty sight; it's not edifying and impressive and heroic, it's just real: real and needy and confused, and here it is (this complicated humanity) brought home to heaven, dropped into the burning heart of God – for healing and for transformation.