

Seventh Sunday of Easter

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Like many of his time, the late medieval artist Albrecht Durer took great inspiration from Scripture, and produced illustrations that were used in, for example, books of the Passion, or the Psalms, or others. You may have seen one or another of his renderings of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are fierce, determined, and frightening, riding down peasants and others (in some versions), or riding above sleepy ordinary villages below, going about their ordinary business.

Or there's the illustration of the story from John where, after the resurrection Mary Magdalene returns to the garden where Christ's tomb is, and sees not Jesus but someone she thinks is the gardener. He's dressed in typical peasant clothing, carrying a shovel, and wearing a slouch hat. But through the hat shine the rays of a nimbus halo. Not a gardener, but the risen Christ. It's a print that's moving, and powerful, and poignant.

These drawings and prints tell stories that people at the time mostly could not read, so they were part of folks' formation. They manage to capture both the reality of the situation and its mystery—something about the presence of God and what God is up to.

But Durer was, I think, a bit baffled by the Ascension. Here we have the disciples staring up into the heavens in awe, and we have some clouds. But instead of Jesus, with all his wounds, floating up to heaven on a cloud, or making a leap any superhero would be proud of, we see only Jesus's ankles and his feet—and his feet are absolutely flat, as if he is standing on an invisible platform. It's a strange rendering, and one I find highly amusing, but it also poses the question: what did the disciples make of the Ascension? What did they think was happening? What did they think it meant?

Good questions. For even after all the miracles, and all the healings, and all the teachings, and all the shared meals, and the arrest and interrogation of Jesus, and his crucifixion, and his death, and his resurrection—after all that, the Ascension is still a bit startling. Jesus comes back—and then he leaves again, and by a most unusual path. Isaiah was taken up to heaven in a chariot—and is expected to come again to save God's people. And now Jesus. But no chariot, no trumpets, no angels. He just ascends.

John's Gospel gives us some explanation:

First, Jesus has gone to be with the one he calls Father, as he said he would. The Ascension is yet another indication, perhaps the clearest one, that not only does Jesus come from the Father, as the Son and as the Word of , but he also returns there—for eternity, seated at God's right hand.

Jesus and the Father are one. There is no division between them. The Father loves Jesus, the Christ, the Son, and the Son loves the Father. Perfectly. Intimately. Completely. Eternally.

Jesus has the trust of the Father: he's seated at his right hand. Jesus will be the one through whom we are judged, and he is the judge who loves us. Regardless.

When Jesus goes to the Father, when he ascends, he will then send his Holy Spirit—the comforter. The Spirit that will maintain us in truth. Who is also the Spirit who will stay with us, who will guide us, who will lead us into holiness, and who will lead us into all truth. Into all truth—that is, beyond what we know and can know now. Jesus is the truth—and the way and the life—but there is more to come.

The Ascension is a sign of all this, and of more.

One bit of the “more” that doesn't get talked about as much is that when Jesus ascends, he takes his full humanity—*our* full humanity—with him. All of our humanity—our joys, our delights, our wisdom, our dedication and commitment to each other, to the whole of creation, to God: all of that humanity goes with Jesus to the Father. *And also* our suffering, our pain, our grief, our bafflement, our doubts, even our anger and resentment, our pettiness and even our cruelty: all of *that* humanity Jesus takes up with him to the Father as well. And so now, all of our humanity—every bit of it, not just the nice bits, but all of it—is now, with Christ, at one with God, forever. Transformed by Jesus, yes, fulfilled and reconciled by and in him. But not erased. Not suppressed. Not discarded. Every bit of our common humanity is one with God, through Christ.

God knows deeply, intimately, to the very depths and breadth of God's being, what it means to be human. Our frailty. Our ignorance and doubt. Our suffering. And our grief. These are all part of God, and because God the Father and Jesus the Son are one, these are really part of God, part of who God really is, all the time. Along with our pleasure, and our understanding, and our longing. All of what it means to be human is part of who God is and always will be. This is one thing we know, one thing we trust, because of the Ascension.

God knows by experience—not just observation—what it is we face both inside and out, on our own, between us and others, as creatures living in a complicated creation that is not only friendly to us. And so, whatever it is that God is up to, unclear and mysterious as that so often is—what it is that God is up to takes our humanity into account. God is not without humanity. Ever. We can trust, we can be confident that as God bends toward creation, and guides it, and moves it towards its ultimate fulfillment, our humanity, in all its complexity and all its ambiguity, is part of that. In everything that happens to us, expected and unexpected, joyous or disastrous, God is with us as one who intimately “gets” what it means to be human. God heeds what it is like for us to be human. God's love, and God's power, and God's mercy and goodness are formed in a very real way by what it is like for us to be human.

And I find that profoundly comforting, and profoundly reassuring. Whatever it is that's going on with me, or with those around me, or with our whole society, or with the world—I don't have to explain to God what that's like, and what it seems to mean. Not like I would have to do to, say, to a friend, or a colleague, or a therapist. God already knows, and God know it in the same way we know it—throughout our beings, conscious or unconscious.

And whatever it is I feel I need, even need desperately, God already knows why I feel I need it.

However it is I am disposed towards others—and often, I confess, I am not entirely *well-*disposed—God know that too, and God knows why. Even the reasons I will never say out loud.

And knowing us in this intimate, personal way, God in the divine love, also heals and forgives what needs to be healed and forgiven, reconciles what is driven apart, and makes all things whole. God transforms our humanity from within it, alongside it—not at a distance, not from outside. So that nothing about what it means to be human is alien to God. Nothing that is human is unknown or unloved by God. Even our deep, deep bafflement with ourselves, and alienation from ourselves—God knows, and loves, and heals that.

Nothing that is human is alien to God.

Nothing about who we are in ourselves.

Nothing about who we are with and without each other.

Nothing about how we live and move in God's good and damaged creation.

And, as Paul says, nothing can separate us from God. Not ever.

When Jesus goes up into heaven—whether on a cloud, or with a great leap or elegant rising up, or even flatfooted—he takes all of our humanity with him. So that it is now, most assuredly, with God, part of God, all of it.

And so we don't need to worry about whether God knows, or understands. God does.

We don't need to worry about whether or not God is with us. God is.

And we don't need to doubt that God loves us. God loves us. All of us. In all that we are.