

**Sunday 1st September Evensong
Trinity 11 (C)**

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 33.13-22

NT: John 3.22-36

‘The one who comes from Heaven is above all.’

Imagine- if you will- that you are standing outside this very church some one hundred and fifty years ago. I hope you will be able to engage with this thought exercise without physically standing outside and thus gaining a convenient excuse to exit church a few minutes early. Princes Dock would not have been the preserve of tourists idling their way back to the Crowne Plaza or of the occasional queue for the steamer packet, but a bustling mass of people from all over the world arriving at and waiting to leave these shores.

Perhaps what would have been the most noticeable would have been the cacophony of different languages that would have been audible from the steps of St Nicks.

I have studied languages almost all my life, but when people ask about fluency I’m always reticent. Though I would back myself to navigate a menu or even a delicate social situation in Prague or in Padua, I still don’t think I am fluent. This is partly due to laziness- whilst the aspect of language deployment that requires a cocky, all guns blazing insertion into an unusual social scenario is something I’m pretty comfortable with, I am, simply, too idle to learn grammar properly. My brain is incapable of deploying the mathematical skills necessary to drill tables of verbs, nouns, adjectives, conjunctions and prepositions into my head.

Indeed, I have always found prepositions the most difficult of them all as a simple confusion between changes the sense of meaning entirely. Take for example a simple phrase- ‘I ate with my friends’. Make a mistake with the preposition and linguistic chaos ensues- and the embarrassment of announcing that you have eaten in or on your friends in another language is very tangible.

Indeed, I am not even sure I am confident about English prepositions. Take our second lesson this evening, from John's gospel. The phrase 'the one who comes from Heaven is above all' is dependent on a particular understanding of 'above'. Does this mean that the one from Heaven, which is, of course, Christ, taller than us? Well no, being 'above' here obviously takes on a deeper meaning than a purely physical one. I did, my friends, warn you that prepositions are complicated. However, the fact that he is above us metaphorically is inexorably linked to the moments in his life where he was physically 'above' us.

There are two key moments when Christ is physically raised up to a position above us- first, on the cross, where he is hoisted onto roughly hewn wood to look down, in pity, on a world that killed him. Here he takes up our humanity, which is to say our sin, and there it dies with him. Secondly, the moment of glory, the ascension, when a Christ who has died and risen and who remains fully God and fully man takes our humanity, which is to say our new, redeemed humanity, into the very heart of heaven. Christ, then, is both of us and above us.

By his death, resurrection and ascension Christ is above our petty politics, he is above our fears, he is above our lusts. He is above the comedy of what we perceive of as our successes and above the tragedy of what we perceive of as our failures. And yet, whilst all these markers of our ridiculous humanity are beneath him, he takes them up as well, they are of him as much as he is above them and he takes them with him above, both to the cross where those wicked parts of our humanity die with him and to Paradise, where our redeemed humanity is crowned where, as Isaiah promises in our first lesson- 'your eyes will see the King in his beauty'.

To introduce some conjunctions to the melange of prepositions, this is not a case of either/or but of both/and. Christ is both above all the mess of the world, and a totally

integral part of it. This, I would suggest is the central reason for Christian cosmological hope; Jesus is both on the Cross and reigning in Heaven. If he were only alongside us, amidst this mire of suffering he would be useless, if he were only above he would be without compassion. Yet he is both. As John says 'The one who comes from Heaven is above all' but he also 'Testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony'- this is an image of Christ who is above and alongside, who knows the pain and folly of earth, and yet still redeems it in Heaven.

I would wager that it doesn't always take a banal thought exercise to transport you to a place where a cacophony of different words and phrases seems overwhelming. Our senses are assaulted with the chaos of the world whether we stand at the banks of the Mersey or whether we are just scrolling through our phones. Yet, be it political pressures or internal wranglings or whichever one of the strange mix of human mundanities that might be worrying us this week, it is crucial to remember that 'the Father loves the Son and places all things in his hands' and that, with a Son who has known both Heaven and the Cross, as our redeemer and guide, we have nothing much to fear.

'The one who comes from Heaven is above all.'

Amen.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie