
Do We Exist?

Acts 1:1-11, Colossians 3.1-4, Luke 24:44-53

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 5, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I happen to know identical twin brothers, now in their seventies, both ordained, both monks, and both Anglican bishops. They have a party piece that they do when one of them is invited to preach on Ascension Day. One brother hides somewhere behind the lectern, while the other goes up in the pulpit to preach the sermon. At the agreed moment, the one in the pulpit says, "The ascension of Jesus is a difficult event to envisage. Imagine it went something..." and his voice trails off mysteriously, while he slowly disappears into the lower regions of the pulpit, until moments later his twin brother pops out from behind the lectern and says, "Like this!" It never fails to bring the house down, especially if the congregation doesn't previously know that the two bishops are identical twin brothers.

The Ascension of Jesus is indeed a difficult event to envisage. For many centuries, Ascension Day was regarded as the fourth great festival of the church's year, along with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. But today in many circles it's almost disappeared altogether. It's not hard to explain why. Centuries ago, in the parts of the world shaped by Christian faith, people assumed everything in the Bible could be accepted without question. They saw the Bible not only as an accurate account of the character of God and the nature and destiny of humankind – but also as a trustworthy portrayal of the workings of the created world. But gradually, between 1500 and 1800, four things happened. The Reformation took away the sense that the Bible spoke with a single voice, because influential people started to interpret the scriptures in startlingly different ways. The Wars of Religion undermined much of the church's moral authority, because Christianity started to seem less oriented towards peace, and more like a pretext for war. The scientific revolution offered an alternative form of authority for investigating creation, to which it gave a new name: nature. And finally, the philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment shifted the starting point of their thought from God to human beings. Humanity, rather than God, was now the center of the world, and the measure of all things. If belief in God was going to be credible, it had to fit into the scientific and philosophical matrix we now know as modernity.

Christianity had to adjust to these four enormous changes. In some ways it's still doing so. In this new world everything was coming to be valued by the extent that it met one of two criteria: either it proved true to the experience of our five senses, or it proved useful to our wellbeing and general flourishing. Experience and usefulness became the tests of truth and value. For a period Christianity could rely on its social dominance to protect it from such examination. But that train's left the station in most places today. So Christianity has set about ensuring that, even if its central claims may not be true, it's nonetheless made itself practical and useful, so it's good to have around.

I remember standing next to a young man at a funeral. He was searching for meaning through the tears as he was watching the body of a person he loved being lowered into the ground. Afterwards, he said to me, "The church is quite good at death. It's life it doesn't know what to do with." Think about those words: "The church is quite good at death. It's life it doesn't know what to do with." They perfectly sum up the ways the church has responded to the modern age. That young man could see the church was relating to his sense experience at this tender moment – his tears, his sense of fragility, and dust returning to dust. He could see the church was useful, for helping him mark such a painful threshold, in a way that nothing else could. But he had no use for the church in happier times, and no sense that its story mapped onto his regular experience. It didn't cross his mind that his own experience and his own judgment of usefulness were the only ones that finally mattered.

And in this context, it's easy to see why Christians don't make a big celebration out of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Because Jesus' ascension is an embarrassment by both of the modern criteria. As regards sense-experience, the modern mind has no understanding of what it might mean for God in human form to rise up

with no rocket boosters and no dangling helicopter-supported winch. It sounds ridiculous. As regards usefulness, what on earth is the use of such a heavenly-bound stunt? If God can do those kinds of stunts, why in heaven isn't such power directed towards something genuinely useful? So Ascension Sunday is perhaps the day above all other days to reflect on how difficult many modern people find it to believe that God exists. The church has tried hard and long to be practical and useful, but in the end there's a residue of Christianity that remains stubbornly impractical and useless. And this puts the church permanently on the defensive.

What I want to do today is to show that there's no need for Christians to be defensive about their view of truth, and that Christ's ascension, far from being an embarrassment, is at the heart of that truth-claim. To do that, I want to suggest what's wrong with the conventional way the world thinks about truth today, and then suggest how Christians rightly think about truth.

I've said that the conventional secular way of thinking about truth is to judge what is tangible and what is useful. This is where the mistake lies. If God is God, God is just as much God whether we regard God as practical and useful or not. The trouble about putting our own experience and wellbeing as the measure of all things is that everything is judged by the transitory criteria of whether it's practical or useful for *us*.

Stick with that word "transitory" for a moment. Everything that's created – every plant, every person, every continent, every planet, every star – is changing all the time. Every time you or I do something, we change. Our history changes and our experience changes, and we become a person whose identity is subtly altered. We are changing every second of every day. So how can we be the measure of all things? How can something that is constantly changing be the measure of anything? Think about the experience of being on a moving train. Everything that's also on the train looks fairly still, and normal. But once you try to measure something you can see through the window, it's obvious you can't, because you're moving so fast you can't get a steady view. That's what human judgment is like. We're all on a moving train, moving in time and in space. We don't realize how flawed our perspective is because most of the time we're judging things close by. But when we go for greater things it's obvious we're in no position to measure anything.

We call ourselves "beings" – "human beings." Think about that word "being" for a moment. When we say "being," we mean someone still, someone who doesn't change, someone constant, someone who's always true. "Being" is a way of life that's somehow dynamic and static at the same time. Human life isn't like that. Sometimes we meet a person who has an incredible grace, a wonderful dignity, a marvelous poise, a thrilling stillness, and often we feel such a person is close to God. But that's the point. Human life isn't really *being*. That's what *God's* life is like. Human life is better described as *becoming*. We shouldn't really be called human *beings* – we should be called human "*becomings*." Only God is a true being. The only being who can act without changing identity is God. Everything else in all creation is a "becoming," a creature or thing that's in constant process of growing or changing or dying – or all three. Everything else acts in such a way that it closes off some of the possible options and thus reduces the potential of their existence. God alone acts in such a way that there is no loss, no reduction, just *being*. We could properly talk of divine *being*, and human *becoming*.

Think about a moment in your past when you wanted time to stand still. This view, this relationship, this music, this sensation, was so perfect, you wanted to freeze the frame and turn the relentless video of your life into a still photograph. You can't do it. You can suffocate a beautiful moment by trying to capture it and put it in a jar. That's what makes our moments of ecstasy simultaneously our moments of greatest despair. They're the moments we most acutely realize our mortality. Our lives grow, change and decay in remorseless becoming. Only God's life remains ever-present in constant being.

Just look what that means for the way we think about Jesus. Colossians says, "Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God;" it goes on to say, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." In the language we've been using, Jesus is the being of God, set amidst the becoming of human life in the world. This is why those shaped by Greek philosophy found it so difficult to accept Jesus; it's also one way of

explaining why Muslims can't comprehend what Jesus means to Christians. Muslims grasp that God is being, permanent and unchanging, and that we are becoming, transitory and contingent. But if Jesus enters the world of becoming, they argue, how can he still be God? It's a good question.

To answer it, let's go back to the creation story. On the sixth day, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." We always take this to mean Adam and Eve. But in Colossians Paul declares that *Jesus* is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. What that means is that when God made humanity, God made humanity to look like Jesus. We sometimes talk as if God made Jesus to look like *us* – but Paul says it's the other way round: *we* were made to look like *Jesus*. Our becoming was made to look like Jesus' being. When Paul says, "Seek the things that are above," he means, "Make your *becoming* as much as possible like Christ's *being*."

And that brings us to Ascension Sunday. The whole story of the gospels, from Christmas to the Ascension, is of how God's *being* entered this world of *becoming*, and was subject to the full reality of human experience of becoming, most of all the suffering and agony and death of the cross. The question of Christmas, fully answered on Good Friday, is, whether God can fully enter the world of becoming, and suffer as we do. The question answered on Easter Day is, whether Jesus remains God in dying on the cross, whether he loses his eternal being. The resurrection shows Jesus has not lost his being, his everlasting relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And so the final question then remains, will Jesus take his experience of human becoming back into the life of the Trinity, will human becoming have a place at the heart of God – not just during Jesus' earthly life, but forever? And this is the question which is answered in Jesus' ascension to the right hand of the Father. The answer is a resounding "Yes."

And that turns the whole of modern skepticism about belief on its head. Modernity assumes there are a host of things we humans can be certain about, based on our experience and our methods of research and our extensive knowledge of the world. But as we've seen, all of this confidence is based on the shaky sand of becoming. All of our wisdom is transitory, and our whole perspective is changing, decaying, and eventually dying. The things that ultimately matter are in the realm of being. Those are the things that truly exist, because they are the only ones that last forever. So our perennial human question, "Does God exist?" is revealed as presumptuous and absurd. God is the name we give to Being, to that which lasts forever. The answer to the question is, "God alone exists. Nothing else finally does." The interesting question isn't, "Does God exist?" The interesting question is, "Do *we* exist? Given that we abide in the transitory world of becoming, do we really exist?"

Hear the good news of the Christian gospel. The Holy Trinity, the one true Being, loved the creation so much – enough, indeed, to long for that creation not just to change and become, but truly to exist, to *be*. And so Jesus came at Christmas to enter the world of becoming, to *be* in that world of becoming. Jesus lived a true life of being in the midst of this transitory world of becoming, even to the point of death, the ultimate form of decay. But the God of Being raised Jesus from death, and in his glorious ascension Jesus took the becoming of God's children into the heart of God, that those who see their true being in him shall not finally become, and thus decay and die forever, but find their true being in him. Jesus' ascension turns contingent human becoming for the first time into true human *being*.

So Jesus' ascension isn't an embarrassment. It's the answer to one of the most important, perhaps the *most* important question there is: "Do we exist?" And the answer is, because Jesus has ascended to the Father, "Yes – we can."