

## Sunday after Ascension Day Sermon

In April 1961, the twenty seven year old Yuri Gagarin became the first man ever to go into space.

It was an event with all kinds of significance, one of them being a great Cold War triumph for the Soviet Union. The Americans and the West, for all their wealth and glamour, hadn't managed this, had they? This showed where real progress was being made, where the future of humanity was – in Communism.

And part of the propaganda purpose to which Gagarin's flight was turned was the mockery of religion. This, remember, was the opium of the people, a drug designed to dull them, to keep their minds on heaven and not on earth, to eclipse the vital questions of class, power, wealth and poverty. It needed to be exposed for the con-job it was. There's no hell beneath us, above us only sky .... and now, wonderfully, Gagarin had proved it. I went into space, but I didn't see God there, said the cosmonaut. The heavens are, after all, just space.... more and more and more space, empty and silent and dark, forever and ever.

Interesting caveat: perhaps Gagarin did *not* actually say that. There's an alternative version of history circulating, which attributes the words not to Gagarin but to Nikita Krushchev, General Secretary of the Communist Party at the time. But the cosmonaut was an international sensation, and so the propagandists couldn't resist putting the politician's words on his lips. It was a fantastic PR hit. But in truth, says the alternative version, Gagarin would never have said it. Communist hero in public, in private the man was a baptised and believing Christian.

Who said it, though, is ultimately unimportant. The bigger question is whether Christians should be in the least bit concerned about the fact that actually, when you get up above the clouds, there is nothing there .... just space and stars onwards to infinity. No angels, no harps, no thrones, no God.

Well, I said that was the bigger question, but it's not a very difficult one. The answer is 'no'. I suppose you might find some Christian somewhere who believes that if you had a spaceship that could fly fast and far enough you would find where God lives. That it would, in principle at least, be possible to draw a map which showed the precise location of the heavenly throne. But in fact I doubt even that. Most Christians do not believe, and Christian teaching has always denied, that God is locatable like that. That he occupies a point on our maps. Indeed, if he did, Christianity says, He could not be God – he'd be just another item in the world. Dog, Table, Planet, God – well, whatever God is, he's not that kind of thing. Indeed, He's not a *thing* at all. Gagarin peering out of the spaceship windscreen and not spotting him... it's just irrelevant to whether or not God is real.

But it's too easy to say what Christians *don't* believe. God's not an object on the map, fine. Well, what is he then? I like C.S. Lewis' analogy best. Responding, as it happens, to the Gagarin story, Lewis wrote that for a human being to go into the sky looking for God is like Hamlet deciding to poke around in the attic of Elsinore Castle, determined to find Shakespeare up there. Like Hamlet, poking around in the attic of Elsinore Castle, determined to find Shakespeare up there. To think you can locate God on a map is to get your levels of reality all mixed up. God is to the universe as Shakespeare is to the play. He is not an item *in* the universe. He is on an entirely, utterly, unspeakably different level of reality. That's one reason, incidentally, why the Bible is so fierce on the subject of not making idols. Whatever you think God might be like, or even worse might *be*, the Bible wants to shout 'No, he is NOT'. Not a bull, not an eagle, not a star, not a man. Not of this world.

I'm thinking about all this today, fairly obviously, because it is Ascension-tide. We tell the story of the end of Jesus' ministry on earth – or at least, the end of the phase when he was present as a visible, touchable, individual body. Before the Crucifixion his body was just like yours and mine. After Easter, it was more mysterious – vanishing at will, and elusively strange – but still recognisable, and recognisably a body: he ate fish, and had scars. But at Ascension, the visible, touchable individual – the body you *could*, if you wanted, locate on a map – *goes*. Goes into that entirely, utterly, unspeakably different level of reality. The only words his friends could come up with for what they actually saw was that he seemed to go into the sky – the sky with all its associations of glory and vastness and brightness – but then a cloud took him out of their sight. The cloud: always the symbol in the Bible for the border between our realm and God's realm, between the places you can find on maps, and the reality from which all places spring. The border between Hamlet and Shakespeare, the character and the author. Jesus has crossed the border, and there's no point looking for him now. Men of Galilee! Why do you stand looking up towards heaven? He has given you work to get on with, has he not?

More of the work another time. For now, why is it Good News that Jesus has crossed the border? The clue, I think, comes in our reading from John's Gospel. It's presented as a speech at the Last Supper, and perhaps it was, but it is certainly at the least anticipating the story of the Ascension and reflecting on what the ending of Jesus' story means for the whole thing. Jesus is praying to his Father, and looking forward to his return to the Father: to his being once again where He was before his time on earth. And Jesus says that this return marks his being given authority, 'authority over all people, to give eternal life to all you have given me.'

Now, we could say much about authority, but for now, think of it this way. Shakespeare again. Shakespeare enjoys supreme authority over his characters, because he is their *author*. Everything about them springs from him, it his imagination and will that is at work in them. In him, to echo last week's readings, they live and move and have their being. Well, Jesus being given authority by the Father is a bit like that. Jesus is being made the author of the play of the world, and all the characters within it – you, me, and the whole world story. It's a difficult analogy, because it doesn't mean that the play will just simply run exactly how Jesus wills it, obeying his every whim from now on. Terrible things happen, things that frustrate and contradict what He wants. Yet, the claim of authority, of authorship, is that in the end the whole story will be shaped and informed by Jesus' purpose, by Jesus' character. And in its conclusion, the whole story of the whole world will be revealed as His story – and that means one through which, in the end, the beauty and brilliance, the love and justice are all pervasive.

If the analogy of plays and playwrights doesn't help, try this. The Ascension means that Jesus of Nazareth is become like a spring, a spring planted in the heart of each and every human situation, a spring which will, one day, catch up the whole created universe in its flow. Its flow is beauty and brilliance – all the goodness which we saw in His life on earth: the freedom, the grace, the healing, the love – all of it, pouring ceaselessly, irrevocably, captivatingly into the world. The Ascension means that nothing in heaven or earth can staunch that flow. It flows into every time and place. The earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. That's why it is a Feast. That's why we give glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.