

The Chaplain's Reflection for Ascension Day: Thursday 21st May 2020

The Chapel ceiling of Trinity College was painted by the French artist Pierre Berchet, who had made his home in England. He was a Huguenot, a Protestant who faced persecution in France and, like many of his fellow believers, settled in a country where his faith would be acceptable. His magnificent ceiling consists of one major central picture and two smaller panels. The theme is the Ascension of Christ.

The New Testament Gospels describe a period after the Resurrection of Jesus when individuals and groups met the Risen Christ. Luke in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles describes the final encounter and the Ascension of Jesus into heaven.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

The earliest depictions of this scene show Jesus walking up a mountain into a cloud. One early carving has a helpful hand extending out of the cloud to pull Jesus in. Later medieval pictures and carvings focused on the feet poking out of the cloud as the last earthly sight of the ascending body for the disciples watching from below.

We know from the plan of the Chapel sent out to prospective donors in 1691 by the then President, Bathurst, that the ceiling was always designed with a central painting of the Ascension. The one depicted here is traditional, with the disciples below and Christ being taken up by the cloud above them. It is not what we have now. Our painting was made at the height of the Baroque period. This was an art and architectural movement that loved drama. There was a bold realism that wanted to draw the viewer into an emotional experience, that they might feel themselves to be witnessing an actual event.

Martin Kemp writes: *From La Fosse, Berchet had learnt the Italian – above all the Venetian technique for narrating great religious and secular narratives on ceilings, using a form of illusionism that allowed the actors to be visible coherently from below. ...in the Trinity ceiling we look up diagonally from the point at which we enter the main body of the chapel.*

Berchet wanted those standing in the body of the Chapel to get caught up in the event of the ascension of Jesus. He does not paint the disciples standing below because the viewers become the disciples; standing as they stood gazing up. Importantly, he does not depict this as a loss with those below staring up into nothing but a cloud. Instead, we are invited to see the opening of the cloud and the figure of Jesus being carried into the light surrounded by a host of angels. This is a vision of Christ Ascending in glory and invites those below to celebrate this as a triumphant moment in the story of salvation. Charles Wesley's Ascension hymn begins:

*Hail the day that sees him rise
To his throne above the skies
Christ, the lamb for sinners given
Enters now the highest heaven.*

We who stand below looking up get a glimpse of heaven. This should inspire us and fill us with hope. For Jesus promised that where he is we would be also.

The Collect for the Ascension Day in the book of Common Prayer:

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

The Jesus who ascends to heaven is the Jesus who lived a fully human life and suffered on the cross. The reality of the suffering is not left behind on earth but taken up into heaven to be transformed and redeemed. So, the two smaller panels show angels carrying in one panel the cross itself and the crown of thorns, and, in the other panel, the spear that pierced Christ's side.

All is caught up in the glory of heaven, all is redeemed.

The figures of carved angels and evangelists around the Chapel encourage us to look up.

*Lo the heaven its Lord receives
Yet he loves the earth he leaves
Though returning to his throne
still he calls mankind his own*

*Still for us he intercedes,
his prevailing death he pleads;
near himself prepares our place
he the first fruits of our race.*

The ceiling of the Chapel was given to us to inspire our worship, to encourage our faith and hope that where Christ is, we will be. Now we ascend to heaven in our hearts and minds. In time we will spend eternity in the fullness of the glimpsed heavenly glory.

Christ our ascended King,
pour upon you the abundance of his gifts
and bring you to reign with him in glory;
And the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Ascension Day Sonnet by Malcolm Guite

*We saw his light break through the cloud of glory
Whilst we were rooted still in time and place
As earth became a part of Heaven's story
And heaven opened to his human face.
We saw him go and yet we were not parted
He took us with him to the heart of things
The heart that broke for all the broken-hearted
Is whole and Heaven-centred now, and sings,
Sings in the strength that rises out of weakness,
Sings through the clouds that veil him from our sight,
Whilst we our selves become his clouds of witness
And sing the waning darkness into light,
His light in us, and ours in him concealed,
Which all creation waits to see revealed.*