

A Sermon in King's College Chapel Ascension Day

Anyone who has ever climbed to the very top of a mountain will have had an experience which is both wonderful and ineffable; we want to describe it, and yet know that we could never quite do justice to it in words.

Religious experience is something like this. And it's perhaps for that reason that mountain tops appear in the Bible as places where God's presence is revealed, felt, or understood in a new way. Moses met God on Mount Sinai, and Jesus offered his updating of God's law in the sermon *on the mount*. He was transfigured on Mount Tabor.

Although the Biblical accounts vary as to location, Christian iconography often puts Jesus' ascension from the top of a mountain, and sees him make a vertical take-off into the clouds. If, like many people in the distant past, you believed in a three tier universe where the heavens were in or above the skies, such a picture makes sense. But we don't think like that, which is why the image in the stained glass of this Chapel of Jesus' feet protruding below a lovely white cloud is no longer helpful to those who want to try to imagine the relationship between earth and heaven.

In the end all 'holy geography' breaks down. You are, in fact, no closer to God on a mountain than you are in your bedroom or down a mine. In fact, you are no closer to God in church or

chapel than you are in a supermarket. The difference is that some places help you to pay attention to God and open your mind and heart to the transcendent, whereas others force their busy, trivializing and manipulative agendas upon you and put all higher thoughts far from your mind.

You won't get any closer to God by climbing a mountain or clambering to the top of the chapel or a church tower, but nor will you have a true sense of God or a reasonable hint of the transcendent unless you do move away from those ordinary urgent busy-body things that distract us from spirituality and keep us anxiously earthbound.

Our spiritual task is not to step out boldly in pursuit of God on a mountain-top and stare up at the clouds hoping to catch a glimpse of a divine toe, but to wait in the middle of the ordinary, perhaps having decluttered the space around us a little, as well as our minds, for the gifts of the Spirit. Yes, to *wait*, to wait with uncluttered minds, longing hearts and open hands, that we may be ready to welcome, accept and make a home in our hearts for the God who is not high up and moving away from us, but who waits for us, poised to give mercy and grace to those who know their spiritual poverty and ask for nothing more or less than the blessing of God, the loving embrace of the most highest.

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