

If Ascension Day is more to you than the beginning of a long weekend because that's just the way it is in our country, you may be able to go along with thoughts of kingship, authority or power, indeed thoughts of God. The concrete depiction of someone's ascension (Jesus was not the only one in history) by reputable (i.e. not naive) artists may seem a bit uncomfortable to us, but that is a problem for us rather than for the imaginers. We find rulers difficult, authority figures, people with more authority than we ourselves have or conquered. But globally, power holders appear to be limited. Power is hard to wield, that much seems certain.

Biblical kings did not fare much better. The liturgies at their intronization order them into God's presence (Psalm 110, verse 1: 'Take your place at my right hand; I will make your enemies a couch at your feet.'). but the further description of their lives are soon about misdemeanors, abuse of their position, a humiliating downfall - and God's mercy on them. Sometimes there are personalities, which transcend that: many classic holy figures were 'taken up into heaven', like Enoch in Genesis 5: 'His life came to an end because God took him away'. Elijah disappears before the eyes of Elisha, who tells those who do not believe: 'Do not go looking for him' (2 Kings 2:1-14). Other greats followed: Baruch, Ezra, Moses. In the Greek-Roman world, heroes and emperors, who were praised for their great deeds, were taken up into heaven and elevated to gods. It meant as much as divine confirmation of who they were by giving them access to divine power.

If you are a contemporary of Jesus it is already difficult, but if you were born after him and had to rely on the testimonies of others - like St. Paul - you are stuck with the problem of coming to understand that this Jesus surpassed anything people could imagine. As human, raw at times and vulnerable as His stature was, He transcended existing images. Those who begin to discern the divine in this human nature look for images to, as we say, 'give it a place'. This is exactly what the artist shows who portrays Jesus as a firmly standing man, with stigmata (crucifixion wounds) admittedly, but in prayerful posture, looking up to heaven and conclusively connecting heaven and earth (Rembrandt van Rijn 1636). He belies the cry 'Do not go looking for him', or later 'Do not hold me' (when Jesus is identified as risen): He is the divine man we keep looking for in ourselves.

People want to make Jesus' position clear: He is ruler of the powers, i.e. the world, evil, the seven capital sins and so on. He is given the heavenly position in art that iconography uses for someone of his stature: a preferential place next to God the Creator, the mastermind behind everything, but after making history as a human being, Jesus himself becomes 'Lord of creation', i.e., God. In His 'ascension', the sharply drawn elements are victory over every conceivable enemy and His intronization 'at the right hand of the Father', where the soul seats of every conceivable perfection.

Apparently, we still need to make concrete what we experience in our encounter with God. We meet a human being whom theologians conveniently call 'transcendent'. We meet earthly reality that punches a hole in all our powers of imagination. We start talking about 'eternal', about 'heaven', we say 'present in the world, albeit no longer physically'. We stutter, make naive children's pictures into cores of religion and want them to be believed. That is our problem: the expression of the enduring relationship between the transcendent Jesus and the community he left behind, i.e., us. A logic transcending us that tries to bring the unapproachable to proximity. We try with all our might to connect with people who

know him present because we feel the divine nearness as a salvation: no more that oppressive of earth's self-aggrandizement, desolate and empty, but thank God a ray from upward that robs us of all naivety. That is what we try to look at on Ascension Day.