

The “Hand of God” – The Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension

by The Revd Canon Derek Earis

“What does your blank blank God think he is blank well playing at?” So asked a stranger in York the other day on seeing me walking and wearing a clerical collar. He didn’t really wait for an answer but went off muttering, clearly very angry. The lockdown had got to him and I was a convenient target.

Now I’m sure the doctrine of the Ascension was far from this chap’s mind but it has struck me that he was proclaiming one crude but traditional view of it. That God is seated in majesty in heaven, Christ restored to his right hand. And that God is in control of all things. The other day on my walk, this time without my clerical collar, I ended up near the railway station and in the car park was a large transport police van with the words emblazoned on its side **“Command and Control”**. That’s how my unknown protagonist saw God. In heaven exercising **“Command and Control”** over the whole world. In his rage he thought of God as saying *“I know what I’ll do, I’ll send them a really nasty virus, one that especially attacks the elderly, the vulnerable and those in care homes. That will sort them out.”* If he thought that then no wonder he was angry. So would I be. I could not worship a God like that. Neither could you.

So if God does not **command and control** like that, what is the Ascension really about? That’s what today’s readings for the Sunday after Ascension are trying to help us with.

For a start the disciples misunderstood, yet again. They asked him *“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”* Is this the end of all things? The story concluding? **No** Jesus reminded them. It is not for them to know the end but rather to be his witnesses, to receive the Holy Spirit. Then follows a moment of great awe as Jesus was lifted up. What is this new relationship as Jesus returns to the Father? How is this to be expressed? What does it mean for us? Let’s turn to see if the artists can help us.



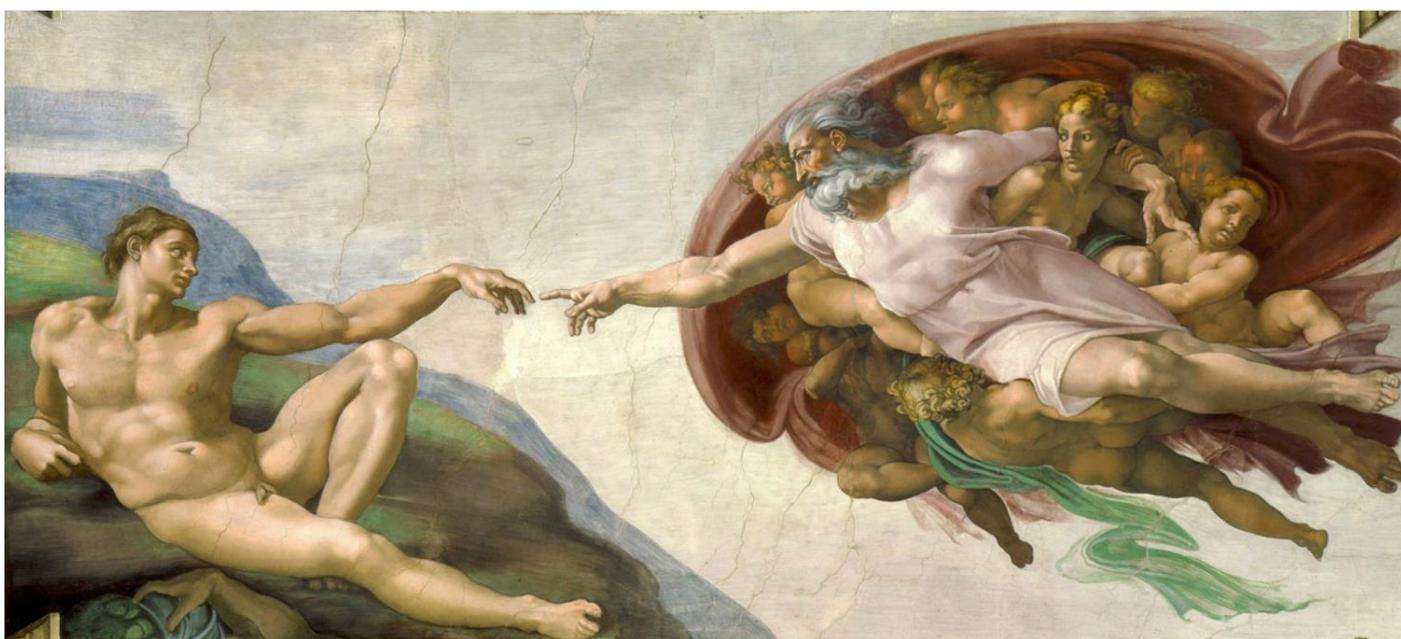
Rembrandt’s *“The Ascension”* concentrates on the awe of the disciples as Jesus parts from them. They are in the shadows at the bottom of the picture but partially illuminated by his great light. What a master at using the light Rembrandt is – how effective it is here. So Jesus is glowing in purity and surrounded by the innocence of cherubs. But as far as the relationship between earth and heaven Rembrandt did not find this composition easy and indeed he changed his mind after painting it.

Originally he showed God the Father in the top of the picture receiving Jesus with outstretched arms, but x-rays show that he eventually removed this and placed a dove. Instead the link between heaven and earth is expressed by the giant palm tree on the left – a symbol of God’s people from earth to heaven.

If Rembrandt was reticent in showing God at all so were the early artists of the Ascension. But they developed a rather creative way round the problem. For we see not a depiction of God but just the “**hand of God**”. Have a look at this 9th century prayer book called the *Drago Sacramentary*. Here the **hand of God** is physically hauling the ascending Christ up. The onlookers can scarcely see it – for it is not very obvious. WE have to look for it on the top right. But God’s influence is seen by his hand reaching out to his Son.



The **hand of God** became a popular fascination down the ages, particularly at this time of Ascension but also at the time of creation. We have this most famous painting of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel “*The Creation of Adam*”. Here the **hand of God** is just about to touch Adam and give him life. No reticence here about painting God but in it is symbolised the supernatural power of God giving life to his creation. The hands nearly touching at the centre of the picture.



The concept has strayed far...football fans will remember the so-called **hand of God** goal – that goal palmed into the net by Diego Maradona in the 1986 world cup. Yet the concept of the “**hand of God**” is of great power and imagination not for footballers to win matches by breaking the rules, but for those who wish to involve the creator God in their everyday lives.

Here we start to get close to what for me is the true meaning of the Ascension. God wanting the best for us and wishing us to build his kingdom. For today's Gospel in its own way illustrates that early ascension understanding of the **hand of God**. What is Jesus asking of the Father in his farewell discourse but to extend his hand to vulnerable and foolish humanity. Yes, Jesus is praying for his disciples and that means for us also. Far from wanting God to **command and control** all things and to send plagues upon us he wants him to help frail and vulnerable humanity. He pleads for his followers to the father asking that he will protect them, from themselves from others. That he will send them the light and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. This is the divine power coming close to us, seeking to touch us, enliven and inspire us. This is the **hand of God** reaching from heaven to earth.

How might this work, for we do not see supernatural hands except on artists canvas? It was left to St Teresa of Avila to remind us that **the Ascension means that we must be God's hands on earth now that Christ has left us**. It is a message of supreme practicality made visible in the present challenges of today's epidemic by so many.

And so let us look at St Teresa and let us say her prayer together.



**“Christ has no body on earth now but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours;
yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on the world;
yours are the feet with which he walks to do good;
yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.”
Amen.**