

## Christianity, Islam and the Son of Man - John Goldsworthy - Sunday after the Ascension 16<sup>th</sup> May 2010

**Readings: Daniel 7: 13-14, Psalm 110, Ephesians 1:15 - 2:10, John 17:20-26**

Compared with some Christian denominations, we Anglicans stand up and sit down quite a lot in the course of our worship. I want, today, the Sunday after Ascension, to say something about standing and sitting as used metaphorically in the New Testament. There is a third Anglican position called “Nodding off”, which is always a challenge to the preacher, so we will see how I go at “Heading off”.

Allow me to bring two things to your attention today. Firstly, we are in Ascensioentide. Secondly, Bishop John Wilson’s new publication about Islam receives welcome coverage in the latest edition of TMA, (The Melbourne Anglican), which is still available at the back of the church. TMA has an article about the launch of this major work by John Wilson, entitled “*Christianity alongside Islam*”. The choice of the word *alongside* rather than *against* is very deliberate. There is also a review of the book by the learned Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral. I hope you will give serious consideration to buying and studying a copy.

Since 9/11, as it is called, with the destruction of the twin towers in New York, Islam has become very much to the fore in our consciousness and concern. We have a grandson who is a paramedic with the Australian army in Afghanistan, so Islam in its extreme forms is much in our minds.

There have been times in past history when Christians and Muslims lived peaceably side by side in cities and towns, even when Muslims were in the majority. It is to be hoped that there will always be peace and good will between Muslim and non Muslim in Australian cities. Yet there are tensions culturally and theologically. The Christian belief in the Ascension of Jesus contributes to the religious tension.

An Islamic scholar posed the complaining question, “We honour your prophet, Jesus, so why don’t you honour our prophet, Muhammad”. What would **you** say in answer to that? My answer would be something like, “I have a huge problem with your prophet because he has reduced ‘Jesus son of Mary’, as you always call him, to being **no more** than a prophet, a mere mortal like Muhammad and the rest of us. But we believe and are sure that Jesus Christ is immortal; that he is the incarnate Son of God who came and lived among us, who offered his spotless life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, rose victorious from the dead and ascended back into the immediate presence of his heavenly Father. No mere prophet ever did all that.”

John Wilson is not blind to the dark side of Islam, yet he believes that the rise of Islam has a positive benefit in that it challenges us to think seriously about what we believe and the extent to which our faith translates into action. Ascensioentide calls us to consider what we believe about Jesus who is called the Christ, that is, God’s anointed One.

2.

The visible ascension of Jesus – rising upwards and disappearing into a cloud, never to be seen again seems strange from a scientific view point. Unlike the ancients who believed the world to be flat, we know that it is a spinning ball and that, in one sense, there is no such thing as up or down. People standing on the north and south poles, pointing upwards and saying, Heaven is up there, would be pointing in opposite directions.

Yet Jesus did not hesitate to speak in spatial and directional terms; e.g. John 6:62, “What if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” And in the Great High Priestly prayer, part of which we heard as our gospel for today, Jesus says, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be **with me where I am**, to see my glory that you have given me because you have loved me before the foundation of the world”.

I hope you can see from this that the Ascension of Jesus is also about our destiny.

When Jesus said, “What if you see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” he was saying very clearly that he would return to where he came from before he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

But also in this passage, he referred to himself as the **Son of Man**. In fact **Son of Man** was his favourite name for himself. The term occurs about 2 dozen times in Mathew’s Gospel, a dozen in John and I did not try counting Mark and Luke.

So what is significant about the term Son of Man? Well, to answer this, I need to refer to something that is a real concern of mine, namely, some of the attempts at political correctness in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is read every Sunday in this church. The term **son of man**, as a form of address, occurs quite a bit in the Old Testament but the New Revised Standard always prints this as **mortal**, or, in today’s reading from Daniel 7, as **human being**. Now mortal may be gender neutral, but that’s where neutrality ends. Son of man suggests to me a sense of origin and the gift of life. Mortal comes from the Latin word for death and so has an emphasis that the Biblical writers did not imply in the term Son of Man. Mercifully, the NRSV stops short of rewording Jesus’ self-appellation, Son of Man, to have him regularly calling himself **the offspring of a human being**.

Why am I spending time on this? Well, because this kind of paraphrasing of what the Biblical writers really said can **mask** important truth; the use of the term **human being** for **son of man** in Daniel ch7. masks the significance of Jesus’ consistently using the term Son of Man to refer to himself. And this has direct bearing on, ‘Who is this Jesus who has ascended into heaven and sits now at the Father’s right hand?’

Daniel, in his vision, sees the throne of God, “the Ancient of Days”, set in fiery splendour in the heavens. Beasts that represent earthly empires opposed to the purposes of God are brought to nothing. Next Daniel sees, “coming with the clouds of heaven one like **a son of man** and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Now bear in mind that the real opposition to Jesus came from the scribes (the lawyers) and the Pharisees, that is from the people expert in Bible knowledge. So when Jesus kept referring to himself as the Son of Man, his stupendous claim was not lost on them. Jesus was referring back to Daniel 7 and stating clearly that **he**, the carpenter’s son from Nazareth, was the one to whom was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; that **he** is the one whose dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and **his** kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed.”

Ascensiontide could well be described as a royal occasion. The King returns to assume his heavenly throne. It is clear that by the time of his death, Jesus had instilled into the minds of the people that he was a king. What they could not (or maybe, would not) comprehend was the kind of king he was. As

he said to Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world, else would my followers resort to violence.”

But Jesus was never in any doubt that all authority was his from his Heavenly Father. From a human perspective, Jesus was the helpless victim of the combined power of the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire. From the divine perspective, Jesus the king was always in charge. “No one takes [my life] from me,” he said, “but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

3.

The laying down of his life on the cross as an outworking of his royal activity leads us to the other posture that scripture sees as very significant for defining the person and work of Jesus, namely **standing**. Before Jesus could ascend to sit in the place of highest honour, that is, at the right hand of the Father, he had some standing to do. You see, kings **sat** on thrones to rule but priests **stood** at the altar to offer sacrifice. So listen, please, to the writer to the Hebrews comparing the Jewish priesthood with the high priesthood of Jesus:

“...every [Jewish] priest **stands** daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered, for all time, a single sacrifice for sins, he **sat down** at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet”.

Jesus sat down, not only to rule, but also as a sign that his work of sacrifice for the sins of the world was completed, perfect and entire. There is nothing we can add to it – nothing we can do that can in any way atone for our sin. On the cross, just before he died, Jesus shouted out, “It is finished.” It was the shout of victory, his sacrifice was complete. As the old Prayer Book spelled it out, on the cross, Jesus “made there, by his one oblation of himself, once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”.

The rise of Islam challenges us to know what we believe. Jesus is referred to in 92 verses of the Koran. Yet the Koran also seeks to hide him by inferring that a look-alike died in his place and Jesus did not surrender his life as the atonement for sin at all. In 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:13 we are challenged always to be ready to give a reasoned answer for the trust we have in Jesus. Rising Islam is putting religion back on the agenda. We may yet be challenged about what we believe. Do you, do I, have an adequate answer? How accurate will that answer be?

Jesus clearly was concerned that that people had an accurate understanding of the nature of his person and of his mission. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” he asked his disciples. They answered, “John the Baptist, ..Elijah, ..Jeremiah, one of the old prophets”. “But who do **you** say that I am?”, Jesus challenges the disciples. Simon Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” To which Jesus gives the telling reply, “Blessed are you Simon. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” What this tells us is that our God is knowable and wants to be known.

Islam says that God, Allah, cannot be known. We can know his laws but we cannot know him. In stark contrast, the Old and New Testaments show God progressively revealing Himself, with this revelation culminating in the person of His Son, Jesus, who said, “Those who have seen me have seen my Father also.” As our Great High Priest, Jesus **stood**, theologically speaking, to offer the sacrifice of no less than himself for the sins of the world. Having offered the perfect sacrifice that

needs no repetition, he **sat down** at the right hand of the Majesty on High, there to wait till all his enemies have been made the footstool for his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

The rise of Islam challenges us to get some solid, Bible based theology under our belt. I empathize, solid, **Bible based** theology. As a friend of mine once wisely said, "If you don't like theology, you don't like God, because theology is just getting to know God better."

John Goldsworthy