



Easter Scenes

[Eric Gill \(1882–1940\), *Ascension* \(1918\), wood engraving on paper, Tate London](#)

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Isaiah 52: 7–15 *Luke 24: 44–53*

When, a while ago, I received a letter for your Dean, asking me to preach on the Ascension, and suggesting that, in the process, I should use an illustrative art work, I accepted, thinking what an interesting way to approach tonight's subject. The weeks passed, and tonight drew ever nearer; and increasingly I began to think, what a challenge. It was challenge enough adequately to address the subject of the ascension; but having to find an artwork which would help us in our exploring was more than challenge enough.

The first artwork which I considered was a roof boss, to be found in the nave of York Minster. From the boss extend the soles of a pair of feet, a very graphic depiction of the parting, ascending Jesus, as seen by the disciples as they stood looking into heaven. [Acts 1.11] I rather liked the simplicity, the directness of the boss' message: 'he was lifted up and a cloud' – or, in the Minster's case, the sky-blue background of the boss – 'took him out of their sight'. [NRSV Acts 1.9]

I was, however, also rather hesitant to choose the boss. For its message seemed to me to be rather too open to suggesting that the Son of God had but dipped in and out of human life, that the Son of God entered this world, lived here for a while, and then departed, ascended from it. If what we humans need is but a divine, visiting lecturer, who will give us moral teaching, even an example of godly living, maybe the roof boss is adequate. I remembered, however, some words of the apostle Paul. Beware, they cautioned. Human will and human actions are not always one. 'I do not do the good that I want', the apostle reflected, 'but the evil that I do not want is what I do.' [NRSV Romans 7.19] The moral teaching of a divine, visiting lecturer may be commendable. It may, however, also be inadequate given humanity's frailty and fickleness.

I then thought of Salvador Dali's 1958 *Ascension of the Christ*. It is a very dramatic painting, the viewer's eye being caught by Jesus' feet, seen from below, and then drawn through his ascending body into the golden godhead. Part of the divine drama, the divine drama which is the ascension, seems, however, to have been overlooked. The soles of Jesus' feet, so central in the painting, are as pristine as they would have been on the day of Jesus' birth. They are unblemished. They bear not even the slightest scratch, let alone the scars of harsh, hammered nails. And that may be a problem for those who believe that what is not assumed

in God's becoming flesh is not healed, who think that, if suffering humanity is not, in and through the ascension, taken into God's healing and transforming heart, human suffering is not seriously addressed. Salvador Dali's ascended Christ perhaps does not properly, seriously, salvifically attend to humanity's pain.

And then I chanced upon Eric Gill's 1918 portrayal of the ascension, which you have reproduced in your service sheet. The faces of the upwardly looking disciples are echoed in that of the ascending Jesus. Their eyes, their noses, their mouths, even the trim of their beards are found in Jesus' eyes and nose, in his mouth and beard. The Christ has become one of them and they have been assumed by the Christ. Yes, the centre of attention clearly is Christ ascending. Yet the disciples also call for our attention. For they have, in some very real sense, been caught up in Christ's ascension. His ascension is, in some very real sense, their ascension. There is here more than a divine, visiting lecturer. Indeed, here there is one who identifies with wounded humanity. His wounds, humanity's wounds are markedly there, lifted into the presence of the One in whom alone they can and will be healed. Further, notice Christ's hand, held up in blessing, blessing his disciples, the very disciples who not so long ago, in the garden of Gethsemane, had been unable to keep watch with him, who had fled in the face of those who came to arrest him, who denied him in the courtyard of the high-priest. The ascending Christ blesses and forgives; and he does so, not seven times but seventy times seven. The Christ never was bound by time, held back by the past. But that is now writ large in the ascension. And then, notice the Mount of Olives. A rugged mount of Olives has given way to rolling hills. In the prophet's words, the rough places [are being] made smooth. [Isaiah 40.4]

Wider creation has been incorporated into the ascending Christ's salvific act. Indeed, not only have the rough places been made smooth, but also the dark places have been lightened. The *shekinah*, God's glory, which the darkness cannot comprehend, is beginning to lighten, not just humanity's, but all creation's darkness. Look how the light of the ascending Christ, the glory of the Christ's nimbus penetrates and pierces the disciples' dark world. Christ's face may be looking to heaven; but the light of his countenance shines upon all, dawn-like, increasingly dispelling the darkness which formerly had shrouded everything.

This evening, however, ours it is to be not just art appreciators, not simply reflective theologians, but also those who, in and through the ascending and ascended Christ, live the ascension.

Let me suggest then that the people of the ascended Christ ought to be earnest, signs and instruments of the ascension, so caught up in Christ's ascension, so living the ascension that others readily allow themselves to be caught up in the life of the ascended Christ.

Let me further suggest that those who would live the ascension ought to express their delight in wider creation, voice their thanksgiving for it, engage in acts of environmental charity. For then, through a part of creation, through us human creatures, all creatures, the whole of creation may increasingly be caught up in the life of the ascended Christ, by whom, and in whom creation also, in its brokenness, may be mended, and, in its natural fragility, know itself treasured with infinite care.

To mark, to celebrate, to live the Ascension is then, as the Collect for the Feast of the Ascension itself records, to beseech God that, as 'our Lord Jesus Christ ... [has] ascended into the heavens, so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell'. On reflection, I suppose that the work of art which I should have commended to your Dean is your life and mine, works of art shaped and worked and to be finished by the ascended Christ, to whom be all glory and power, praise and thanksgiving, now and forever.