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Un-heavening Heaven¹ (John 14: 15-31)

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We're moving towards the end of the Season of Easter. Next week, the church celebrates the Ascension – that strange moment at which Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are said to cease and he 'goes up', somehow bodily, to heaven. The following Sunday, we celebrate Pentecost – the giving of the Holy Spirit and its constitution of the new body of Christ on earth, the church. Tonight's reading prefigures, as it were, these 'events'. But if the church year presents all this in terms of linear chronology – first Resurrection, followed by Ascension, followed by Pentecost and the rest of Christian life, John's way of putting it helps us to see the inner connections between these moments. Which means that rather than seeming just a weird set of happenings 'out there', he points us more to the shift in possibilities for being that may be realized in Jesus' followers. It's as if, James Alison says, John seeks to communicate the lived experience of what's being made newly possible here. So – picking up some clues from Alison – let's have a go at exploring what this might be.²

You might remember that this long speech of Jesus in John 14 opens with him saying that he's going to prepare a place for his disciples in his father's house, and that 'if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also' (14:2-3). And towards the end of tonight's reading, we hear something similar: 'I am going away, and I am coming to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I' (14:28). Now, as Alison points out, the phrase 'I go to the Father' has a particular theological meaning. Just as, in John's gospel, the 'cross' refers both to

¹ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), p.61.

² I am greatly indebted to Alison's discussion in Chapter 3, *Raising Abel*, pp.57-76.

Jesus' death and his glory or exaltation, so Jesus' 'going to the Father means simultaneously his going to death and his going to heaven: for John the two "goings" are the same thing'.³

That might seem relatively obvious, not to mention euphemistic – as if Jesus likes to speak of his death as 'passing on'. But here's where it gets interesting (and a little dense). After all, what happens when Jesus goes to his death, when he hands himself over to die? What happens is that he 'detoxifies' death – he reveals that God does not will our death, and nor is God's love and life bound by death. By 'going to his death' freely, making in some sense a 'show' of death, Jesus brings about the possibility that we mortal human beings might also live unafraid of it. And that matters in lots of ways. It's not just about transforming the prospect of our dying, but about liberating us for life and true solidarity with one another. Think about it. Tyrants use the threat of death and its proxies (shame, disgrace, dispossession) to crush opposition and maintain unjust systems. And equally, when we're run by aversion to death, we tend to live defensively, seeking to protect ourselves and tending to expel or exclude all who threaten to disturb our security, our sense of safety. But if (as Alison writes) our certain 'death has come to be a non-definitive, non-toxic part of [our] story',⁴ then that makes possible a whole different quality of being alive.

I don't want to be glib about this. For any of us, for Jesus himself, it's one thing to imagine God as beyond reach of death and quite another actually to face *my* death or the death of someone I love. There's real anguish to be undergone here, sometimes at the limit of what we can bear. Nevertheless in John's theology, the possibility of living somehow not dominated by death *just is* what Jesus means by his promise to prepare a place for us in the Father's house. It's not that Jesus first dies, then some time later goes to heaven in order to create a place for us when we die. Rather, 'Jesus' going to death is *itself* the opening of [life with God]' because in this

³ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.61.

⁴ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.63.

way he reveals the non-ultimacy of death.⁵ For John, ‘heaven’ is not first and foremost an elsewhere – where we all move some day if we’re good enough. Rather heaven is nothing other than sharing in life beyond death, our imaginations formed by the un-killable life of the Father in the same way Jesus’s imagination was. And because of what Jesus has done, this way of living begins here and now. We have already the possibility of being sharers in deathless, eternal life and so bearers of God’s unthreatened way of being in the world: ‘because I live, you also will live’ (14:19).

Now this understanding of what Jesus is doing by ‘going to the Father’ illuminates what’s happening in the sending of the Holy Spirit. Again, our picture of this can be misleading – as if first Jesus dies, then he goes to heaven, then he (or the Father) or the two of them together, get around to sending the Holy Spirit as ‘some sort of friendly numinous force’⁶ to console us orphans left here below. But that’s way too crude an image. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God, the energy of God who rested on Jesus. She is, says Alison, ‘the inner dynamic of what Jesus was doing’ [we talk about the spirit of a person, the spirit in which they do things]. She is the life of God working through him, the spirit that empowered his living and his dying.⁷ When Jesus ‘goes to the Father’ – that is when he acts out and opens up the possibility for us of living on the other side of death, at that very moment he makes it possible for us to ‘do likewise’ – that is, to come to be possessed by the same dynamic, the same vision and creativity at work in him. All the Gospels bear witness to this when they describe Jesus on the cross as ‘giving up’ his spirit, or ‘breathing out’ his spirit.⁸ His creative act of dying to overcome the power of death is simultaneously his making available his spirit, the pattern and energy of God’s life which empowers us to live in the same way.

⁵ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.63.

⁶ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.66.

⁷ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.66.

⁸ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.66.

Well yes – in theory may be! But how does this become reality for us? How do we really come to share in this freedom, how do we receive and embody this spirit who transforms and overcomes the ‘ruler of this world’, and all the ways we find ourselves struggling in bondage to fear and anxiety? Jesus says: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever’ (14:15). And a little later: ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’ (14:23).

This too is easy to misread. We tend to imagine keeping commandments in terms of rule-following, and loving as ‘straining our feelings’. It all sounds like we have to try very hard to be good enough and to love Jesus enough that one day the Holy Spirit might drop on our heads and make us able to live as freely as Jesus did. But what if it’s more like this? What if loving Jesus consists in following him in seeking to live beyond our ‘culture sunk in death’, no longer acting out of that imagination? What if ‘keeping his word’ is practising the means he taught us to embark on this risky, counter-cultural way of being – things like forgiving our enemies, giving up worry, offering hospitality to those who cannot repay and embracing humility and non-defensiveness? And what if by doing this, slowly and gradually, we will discover the living and creative Source of our life coming more and more to possess us, and find ourselves participating, even in the midst of a death-dealing world, in creating a community of love that lives unbound by death?⁹

The gift of the spirit of God is a real happening – we really do become empowered by a different energy, we find ourselves speaking freely and more boldly, forgiving more readily, more consistently hopeful and at peace. But we become recipients of this gift by means of real human commitments and practices, through courageous participation in Jesus’ alternative way of being in this world and prayerfully opening *our* lives to the energy of God’s endlessly giving life.

⁹ Alison, *Raising Abel*, pp.70-71.

We can relate to the church calendar as though it's a list of arbitrary happenings, that seem (as we move through Easter) to become stranger and stranger, less and less likely. Or we can come to know it as a dynamic unfolding in our own lives, as we practice obedience to Jesus' way and are led by him, through his and our own deaths, into life empowered for deepened self-giving by the self-giving life of God. This is how John invites us to know and live out our discipleship. Jesus said: 'now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, [then] let us be on our way' (14:29-31).