

Ascension Day (A)

1st June 2014

‘With you always ...’

Acts 1: *He was lifted up while they looked on ...*

Eph 1: *the strength of His power at work in Christ*

Mt 28: 16–20: *I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.*

Walsingham, in northern Norfolk, has been a venerable place of pilgrimage since the 11th c. to the shrine of Our Lady’s. As well as the Catholic shrine, there’s also, in the village, an Anglican shrine, and in it there’s a chapel which is dedicated to the Ascension of Jesus. At the risk of seeming a bit irreverent, the decoration in the chapel is focussed on the centre of the ceiling, in which there is a large ceramic feature which mainly consists of Jesus’s two pierced feet disappearing into the blue sky! I’m sure it’s meant devotionally, but I do worry that pilgrims are at risk of going in there and seeing the two feet sticking out from the ceiling and just laughing! If you don’t believe me, look it up on the internet ... ‘Ascension chapel, Walsingham’!

What image do *we* have of Our Lord’s Ascension? Do we see it just as a ‘going away’ — His disappearing from our sight, watching Him fade into the sky? Is it, for us, just the last sight of Jesus, a time for sadness with a secret wish that He ‘still walked the earth’ as He did with the apostles?

And yet, what we hear Jesus say, there, at the end of the Gospel passage, is very clear — it strikes a very different note: “Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.” Jesus’s words are clear and powerful. He is not departing from us to leave us to our own devices, nor just to let us ‘take over His mission’ now. He departs from our sight precisely so He can be with us in a new and better way. The life of the Church, the life of faith, of Baptism and the Sacraments, *is* a life in which we are “with Jesus always, yes, to the end of time.” It’s *not* a second best, as if we would have been better off in Israel in 1st c. walking and talking with Jesus. We are in fact better off, as the Church since the day of Pentecost, with Our Lord constantly with us, present in the midst of almost all humanity as the Church centred around the Eucharist on the altar, Jesus’s real, living, divine presence. When we come to Mass, and offer the sacrifice of His Body & Blood on the altar, we are receiving the fruits of the promise that came from Our Lord’s lips: “I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.” He is with us; in fact He is with the

whole Church, by the power of the Spirit, in Hoddesdon, ... Honolulu, ... Harare ... As much in one place in the Church as in another, with us always, to the end of time.

This means that the feastday of Ascension is part of the ongoing *celebration* of Eastertide. It's not a day to be subdued, but to rejoice with Jesus as He returns to His heavenly home without also leaving us. It used to be the case that at the end of Mass on Ascension Day, the Paschal Candle was extinguished, the smoke wafting up afterwards representing the clouds that took Jesus from their sight. That's no longer the case: we keep the Easter Candle alight now until Pentecost, when the fire of the Holy Spirit comes down on the early Church. Jesus's risen presence is not suddenly taken from us and dissipates quickly as smoke from a smouldering wick. No: Jesus's risen presence is permanent and abiding. This is also why even outside Eastertide we light the Paschal Candle at Baptisms and Funerals: the beginning and end of someone's earthly pilgrimage; the beginning of one's Christian life, and the beginning of one's Christian afterlife, marked by this

permanent presence of the risen Lord — the light of life.

Still, it's important that we recognise that the coming days between Ascension and Pentecost are special days of waiting. We try to picture ourselves as awaiting the Holy Spirit, along with the Apostles. We are filled with hope in Jesus's promise — to be with us always — but at the same time we know that we do need to long for, to pray for, a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is only if we open up our hearts to co-operate with the Holy Spirit that we shall feel the effects of Jesus's abiding presence. Don't expect Him to work miracles in your life if your heart is not longing to be filled with the Spirit! Let's look forward today towards the great feast of next Sunday! What do we need? What is it we most need, if we were honest? What does our Christian life most need from Him? As Jesus returns to the Father, to send the Spirit, let's ask Him to take those intentions with Him, and to bestow the Spirit in power upon us that our innermost spiritual needs will be granted. "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."