

Ascension Day (A)

28th May 2017

'On the Mt of the Ascension'

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.*

It still feels a bit incongruous, even after a decade, to be celebrating the Ascension on a Sunday instead of on its 'proper' day of last Thursday, 40 days after Easter. Especially if I am talking to the schoolchildren about our feast of Jesus's Ascension, I find I'm tying myself in verbal knots trying to explain the 40 days, and then how it doesn't end up on the 40th day! So I, for one, am rather glad that there's a strong likelihood that some time soon the feasts of Ascension Day and Epiphany (6th Jan) might be returned to their correct days in the calendar. It would be lovely to have that rhythm of Eastertide restored; and also give us back that occasion most years to celebrate a school Mass on Ascension Thursday.

But, for now at least, it's on the Sunday, so here we are. It's not clear from the Gospels where the Ascension took place. Some of the Gospels place it in the vicinity of Jerusalem, others in Galilee. I've been to one of the reputed

sites of the Ascension, at the top of the Mt of Olives, on the edge of Jerusalem. There used to be a church there built by the Crusaders, but it's now derelict, and a mini-mosque was built on the spot instead, though it's no longer a site used by the Muslims. There's a small little domed structure in which one can go in to pray — pray and sing! ... many groups do so — I remember once that we did the same; we sang from memory a couple of verses of the hymn, *Alleluia Sing to Jesus*. The 2nd verse sums up our belief in the Ascension of Jesus:

Alleluia! not as orphans are we left in sorrow now;

Alleluia! He is near us, faith believes, nor questions how;

Though the cloud from sight received Him when the forty days were o'er, shall our hearts forget His promise, "I am with you evermore"?

This is the essence of the occasion: not that Jesus has left us, but that — as He says at the very end of the Gospel today — *I am with you always, yes, to the end of time*. Not in some figurative way, just an abiding memory ... No, Jesus is with us really and substantially, living in the heart of the Church, very very close to us: especially in the Sacrifice of the Mass, especially in His abiding presence in

the Eucharist ... in the very tabernacle of our church. By the Spirit sent at Pentecost, Jesus is truly present across the world, in His Church. He did not abandon us at the Ascension; he went so that He could be with His whole Church everywhere, until the end of time.

Our Emeritus Pope, Benedict XVI, when he was Pope, wrote a great work of commentary on the Gospels in 3 volumes called simply *Jesus of Nazareth*. He ends the 2nd book with a consideration of the Ascension. He says:

“Lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried up into heaven” (Lk 24:50–51). Jesus departs in the act of blessing. He goes while blessing, and He remains in that gesture of blessing. His hands remain stretched out over this world. The blessing hands of Christ are like a roof that protects us. But at the same time, they are a gesture of opening up, tearing the world open so that heaven may enter in, may become ‘present’ within it.

The gesture of hands outstretched in blessing expresses Jesus’s continuing relationship to His disciples, to the world. In departing, He comes to us, in order to raise us up above ourselves and open up the world to God. That is why the disciples could return home ... rejoicing. In faith we know that Jesus holds out His hands stretched out in blessing over us. That is the lasting motive of Christian joy.

In effect, Our Lord’s ministry on earth remained unfinished until He returned home to heaven. He ascends to heaven taking our flesh with Him to the presence and glory of the Father, and, as He says elsewhere, “I go to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place I shall return to take you with Me, so that where I am, you may be too.” He didn’t come to this earth to leave *us* here on earth; so too, He didn’t come to stay here on earth Himself. It only makes sense that He returns to heaven, opening that place to us if we stay close to Him. I like to think of us as guaranteed that place in heaven if we stay holding on to the ‘coat tails’ of Jesus: we ascend with Him, as long as we remain a faithful part of His body the Church. Don’t let’s ever let go of Him, through sin or neglect of prayer and the holy Mass. Clinging on to Him in a holy life here on earth, we can be assured that He will lift us up to heaven to the eternal life. Jesus returns to heaven *for us*, not leaving us abandoned on earth, but that we may follow Him to that place where tears and sadness, pain and persecution reign no more — and where the reign of God is the only joy.