

Ascension Day (A)

21<sup>st</sup> May 2020

‘Singing for 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.*

I remember last year’s Ascension Day very well! I didn’t celebrate it here in church, but underground, ... I was with parishioners from the Deanery on pilgrimage to Kraków, in Poland, and on Ascension Day we went to the stunning salt mines on the edge of the city. At the end of the tour, at a depth of 135m underground, we had Mass in a little chapel together, where the altar was made of one huge crystal of rock salt. But we had only a short time for Mass — which was a shame, as it’s a solemn feastday! — so we had to cut one or two hymns from our intended celebration. To make up for it, as we had ‘lift off’ and were whisked back vertically to the surface in the high-speed miners’ lift, we had a quick rendition of the Ascension-Day hymn ... “Hail the Day that sees Him rise, *Alleluia!*”

It is not clear from the Gospels where Jesus’s Ascension actually took place. Some of the Gospels place it in the vicinity of Jerusalem, others in Galilee. When I’ve

been to the Holy Land, I’ve been to one of the reputed sites of the Ascension, at the top of the Mt of Olives. 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 — so we once did the same with a group of priests; when we were all in there we sang from memory a couple of verses of the hymn, *Alleluia Sing to Jesus*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 with His whole Church everywhere, until the end of time.

When I was on retreat once, I read the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of Pope's Benedict's great work, *Jesus of Nazareth*. He ends the book considering the great moment of the Ascension. This is what 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.”

I'd like to end with the beautiful words of the solemn blessing for this feastday ... Please God, they inspire you as we keep this feast in isolation, unable to meet and celebrate the Mass together, this year, neither underground, nor atop a mountain, nor here in St Augustine's ... Yet, still, we keep the feast with an inner song of joy in our hearts ...

[... words of Solemn Blessing for Ascension Day ...]