

Ascension Day (C)

26th May 2022

'I will not leave you orphans'

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

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

Lk 24: 46-53: *He withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven*

It's good to be clear about what the Ascension isn't! It isn't about Jesus having finished His work on earth and shooting off, just to leave the follow-up to the apostles, Pope, bishops ... It isn't about Jesus abandoning His Church. The Ascension is not about Jesus abandoning us. He's not some sort of absentee manager, who set the Church going like some profitable business but now sells up, gets out and leaves the work to others.

We've spent Eastertide hearing about the Resurrection appearances of Jesus to various individuals and groups: firstly to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning outside the tomb; then to various others of the apostles and wider group of disciples. But this period comes to an end today at His Ascension. It was not meant to last for ever; it was a provisional period in which Jesus simply revealed to those close to Him the fact of His Resurrection: those who were to be His witnesses and His missionaries.

What we've been hearing over the last few days in

the Gospel readings has been Jesus's promise: *I will go away and you will no longer see me, but it is better for you that I go, because if I do not go, I cannot send you the Holy Spirit. You should be glad that I go to the Father!* While He walked this earth He had voluntarily confined Himself in space and in time and could only be present to a few disciples in the Holy Land. But with His Resurrection and the preaching of the good news of His triumph over death, it's natural that He should want to be present to the whole Church. The Ascension is the obvious consequence of the Resurrection. Jesus is risen and glorified and He takes His place with the Father. Not just that, but when He goes He takes our flesh with Him to heaven, and opens up that way for us; the chance for flesh and blood to be intimate with God: that's His promise.

But most of all, Jesus ascends to His Father so that He can be present to us in a new way. He sends the Holy Spirit upon the Church so that He is even closer to us than when Jesus walked this earth. With the Holy Spirit poured out upon the Church at Pentecost, we are fired with the

mission of the risen Jesus. We are not muddling along trying to remember Jesus in the past. We have Him with us guiding us in the Church and given to us in the sacraments. The sacraments aren't some sort of consolation prize, a poor replacement for Jesus because He's gone away! They are the very way God wants to be close to us — and that's why we value the Mass, and the other sacraments so much: this is God's plan, His way of coming to His whole people. The words Jesus uses in the Gospel today to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit are: "*clothed with power from on high.*" You can think of this as the difference between the apostles' behaviour before and after Pentecost. Even after the Resurrection they were bemused and frightened by all accounts: they knew that He had risen, they'd seen that first hand; and yet they were quite incapable yet of beginning their mission. That only changed when the Spirit came down upon them. This just proves that Jesus had to withdraw from their sight at the Ascension: the Resurrection itself was not enough; they needed that bathing — that clothing — with power from on high, to

give them the courage, protection and spirit to go out there and spread the Gospel which they had been prepared for in terms of knowledge and experience by Jesus.

We too, have to know and receive the Holy Spirit. It is not enough simply to know 'about' Jesus or know 'about' His resurrection. What we need to animate our lives into the good, into real charity and action, is the indwelling, the clothing, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That's why these days should be special days of prayer for us: days of longing and yearning for a renewal by the Holy Spirit. We can and should be fired up about our faith by the Spirit: the knowledge and love of Jesus makes sense not just of our life, but of the lives of all people, all humanity, all creation. And not just 'making sense' of it all, but thereby giving it hope. For this we need the Holy Spirit; and for this, like the apostles, we rejoice on this feast of the Ascension. Jesus withdraws from the *sight* of the world, but so that He can be in our *hearts*, where we love and make decisions. *I do not leave you orphans, says Jesus; ... I will be with you always, yes, to the end of time.*