

Ascension Day (A)

18th May 2023

‘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.*

For 5+ yrs I was a hospital chaplain, in the City / E. End of London, and therefore worked very closely with my Anglican colleagues, and had to use their chapels for my Masses with Catholic patients, relatives and staff. I remember one Ascension Day having a conversation with the Lead Chaplain, my line manager, an Anglican cleric. And I learnt that in their tradition they extinguish the Paschal Candle at the end of the Ascension Day service, and do not light it again, after, whereas we continue to light the Paschal Candle until the end of Eastertide (at Pentecost). Their idea is that the smoke, as it wafts up from the extinguished candle, signifies the ascending Jesus. OK, I got the idea, but it did make me think — is it right, or not, that we leave it lit for the whole 7 wks of Easter?

I think that it is. Let me quote you some words from St Augustine, that great preacher, written explicitly for the

feast of the Ascension:

For just as He remained with us even after His ascension, so we too are already in heaven with Him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies. ... While in heaven He is also with us; and we while on earth are with Him. He is here with us by His divinity, His power and His love. We cannot be in heaven, as He is on earth, by divinity, but in Him, we can be there by love. He did not leave heaven when He came down to us; nor did He withdraw from us when He went up again into heaven.

Yes, this feast is not a feast of His going away, not really — it is a feast of His withdrawing merely *from our sight* — any more than a loved one’s migrating to Australia is a definitive departure from us; it is not: they remain with us in love, and spirit, and we find all sorts of ways of communicating with them in closeness. Jesus achieves this to the max.!

I remember one Ascension Day (2019) very well! I didn’t celebrate it in my parish, 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 our tour was running late, so we had only a short time for Mass — which was a shame, as it's a solemn feastday! — and we had to cut one or two hymns from our intended celebration. To make up for it, as we had our 'ascension' after Mass, and were whisked back vertically to the surface in the high-speed miners' lift, we had a quick rendition of the Ascension-Day hymn, in the close confines of the lift ... "Hail the Day that sees Him rise, *Alleluia!*" It sounded quite good, actually! It's a great day for singing of our love for the Lord, who has gone away from our sight, but who has not gone away at all, really ... as St Augustine said.

And I remember another occasion, singing about the Ascension, when in the Holy Land! 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, because of the amazing acoustic! — so we once did the same with a group of priests; when we were all packed in there 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 with His whole Church everywhere, until the end of time.

When I was on retreat once, a few years back, I read the 2nd 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.” (*my italics*)

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 neither underground in a salt mine, nor atop the Mt of Olives, but, still, in a place that is filled to bursting with the song of joy in our ascended, glorified Jesus ...

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

May almighty God bless you, for on this very day His only-begotten Son pierced the heights of heaven and unlocked for you the way to ascend where He is ...

May He grant that, as Christ after His Resurrection was seen plainly by His disciples, so when He comes as Judge He may show himself merciful to you for all eternity ...

And may you who believe that He is seated with the Father in His majesty, know with joy the fulfilment of His promise to stay with you until the end of time.