

Ascension Day (B)

9th May 2024

'Clinging to His garments'

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

Eph 4: *the one who rose higher than all the heavens is ... he who descended*

Mk 16: 15–20: *there at the right hand of God He took His place*

Even from the word 'go,' in Eastertide, we have been looking forward to the Ascension. The account in St John's Gospel — read on Easter Tuesday at Mass — tells us that the moment St Mary Magdalene saw and finally recognised that the one whom she thought was "the gardener" was in fact her Risen Lord, and fell at His feet, she was told by Him, "*Do not cling to Me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go and find the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.*" So, united with the mystery of the Resurrection is the further mystery — the *completion* of the Paschal Mystery, in fact — of the Ascension, the return to the glory of heaven of the one who came down from heaven. What was the alternative to His ascending? Well, I suppose, an ongoing, *ad infinitum*, sequence of Resurrection appearances of the Lord, until the end of the world. Yet how unsatisfactory that seems: a sort

of 'holding pattern' of incompleteness. No, it makes perfect sense that the Risen Lord withdraws from our sight into His heavenly home, to that "glory which [He] had with the Father before the world was made." The Ascension completes the cycle of *exitus / reditus* begun with the Incarnation: the Lord who came down, now goes back up, His mission of salvation completed; but being completed *in and through* that Ascension in our flesh. It's not that He packs up and heads home because He can't do any more here below; but He ascends *for us*, and, one day, please God, *with us*.

That's not to say that the Ascension was an easy thing for the Apostles to cope with, after their three years of accompanying Him day-in, day out. Just the other day (Tuesday's Mass) we heard Jesus's comment in the Last Supper discourses (Jn 16: 5–7): after His stating that "*I am now going to the One who sent Me,*" He goes on: "*You are sad at heart because I have told you this. Still, I must tell you the truth: it is for your own good that I go, because unless I go the Advocate will not come to you.*" And today,

as we heard in Acts 1, in the account of the Ascension, they are asked by angels, “*Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking up into the sky?*” Yes, they were bereft, bereaved, losing sight of the Lord they loved; but that sadness was not to be with them for long: the power from on high, promised by Jesus — the very Spirit of Father and Son, God Himself — would be upon them in a matter of days. And, as the very last words of Mark’s Gospel indicate, in that profound and joyful way of the Spirit, “*they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the Word by the signs that accompanied it.*” They were not bereft, they were accompanied, more closely now than as they walked the streets of Galilee and Jerusalem with Jesus; more closely, now, because of the Paschal Mystery — the whole Paschal Mystery, Ascension included.

I am well used to accompanying the bereaved; a parish life such as I had prior to Newman House meant regular funerals; in fact, over my 14 years some 241 funerals. After every funeral Mass, as I began the rites for

committal of the body of the deceased person, there was a choice of short Scripture texts, one of which was my favourite: “*Our true home is in heaven and Jesus Christ whose return we long for will come from heaven to save us*” (Phil 3:20). It echoes words in St John’s Gospel, another favourite passage for funeral Masses: “*I go now to prepare for you a place, and when I have prepared you a place, I shall return, to take you with Me, so that where I am, you may be too*” (Jn 14: 2–3). These words of Jesus fill out the meaning, and consolation, of today’s great feast of the Ascension. He ‘returns home’ not to leave us, but to make ready a place for us. He returns to heaven in the fullness of His humanity, taking our flesh, replete with the horrible wounds we inflicted on Him, into paradise and into the presence of His Father. As He ascends, so humanity is being *welcomed home* to heaven in the person of Jesus. No wonder it’s such an important feast! It *completes* the Resurrection, and it *prepares* for Pentecost.

This feast, then, should renew in us that deep Christian sense that we are on a *pilgrimage*; that this life is

not the be-all and end-all, but a journey to another, and holier, place, and we must not get so distracted on the journey that we cling on to the here-and-now and forget to go on to our destination. “*Our true home is in heaven ...*” for it is Jesus’s true home which He has opened up to us. We are assured of this home, if we hold faithfully to Jesus. It’s as if, as He ascends, so can we — clinging to His garments, as it were (not to keep Him here below, but to go with Him!) — but we can only go with Him if we’re actually close enough to Him to be able to reach out and hold on! As He is about to ascend, He has a task for us, which means that that clinging-on to Him is not some passive approach to life. He commands His Apostles at the Mount of the Ascension: “*Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all creation; He who believes and is baptized will be saved ...*” The very best way to find our way home to heaven is to make sure that we are showing others the way there, too! — helping those around us to see that “*our true home is in heaven,*” at home with the Lord Jesus. Our guidance, and our explaining the Way,

makes it more likely that we are making serious efforts to stay on that very Way ourselves.

“*Do not cling to Me*” here below, Mary Magdalene was told; don’t cling to Me as if it can all be held static in some earthly paradise; we must let go, so as to keep. Mary Magdalene, and the Apostles, and every Christian since has had to learn this, that “only surrender signs eternal lease” as a poet-nun once put it. They had to let Jesus go (from the sight of the few) to let Him come (for the sanctification of the many). And we are the beneficiaries: “*Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.*” Blessed are we, as we gaze towards heaven this Ascension Day and in our hearts, like St Stephen in his vision moments before martyrdom, “*see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God*” (Acts 7: 56) ... awaiting us.