

Isolation Radio Talk

This other world, faith tells me it exists

Good morning. I've never made any secret that defending the idea of The Ascension is tough. And for those that haven't heard of The Ascension it is the moment when the resurrected Christ, ascended (obvious now, where the title of this most important Church festival comes from), ascended to eternal life, with God.

You can be soft and sentimental about Christmas; a baby born in a stable – babies are sometimes born in strange places; and that's new and it touches us deeply. Something happens; a child is innocent, helpless. Care and safety are at risk. It is the same with Good Friday too - innocent people still suffer - we have felt that with COVID-19; we know about cruelty. We certainly do! Then there is Easter; what I have said to you these past weeks is that something ... really ... happened.

Here is a mystery to be unravelled and even if you do not believe, I wonder,, would be quite nice to believe? Is this the only life; if so, what does it mean?

But Ascension! - did you know St Augustine thought it the most important of all Christian feast days? And although Ascension can be difficult to talk about, I am agree with him. It is difficult because it seems so improbable.

I am probably so out of touch with how English is taught these days, but I think a way to get into Ascension is to start with those twins – metaphor and simile. The Ascension is a metaphor that places Christ at the heart of God (another metaphor). It tells me that God is no stranger.

Imagine for a moment you have been invited to a party - there will be all sorts of people to meet - new people. Yes, lots of new people and the sort of question you might ask yourself is will I know anyone? Will I do the right thing? If I do not know anyone I don't want to go. What do I wear? I shall feel out of place, I shall stand alone at the edge. Will anyone talk to me? I shall be different from everyone else; everyone will be looking at me and thinking who is that stranger? Ever had that experience?

Then you discover that someone else has been invited who you know. You like that person, that person will be good to be with, you trust that person, they'll know what to wear – you can be cool together; you can go together and, more importantly, stay together. Phew, at once the whole idea of the party seems better and brighter. It *will* be all right. You enjoy it precisely because someone is there who gives you confidence in yourself.

That is what this Festival of The Ascension of Christ tells you. One day you will die. You cannot get away from it but the Christian faith and the Christian hope is that the Christ who once walked this earth as Jesus, who chose twelve disciples, who was cruelly done to death and just as gloriously raised from the dead, because of the Ascension, has gone on ahead of you - he is there waiting for you. Christ knows what it is to be human; to be tempted; to laugh; to cry; to mourn; to

be angry; to be tired and exhausted; to love and be loved. He understood the boy who was upset by the sparrow that fell to its death. He cared for the mother who was heartbroken because her son had died. He was the man who himself wept tears over Jerusalem because of what was to become of that City. He still weeps. He knew, what it feels like to be beaten up, tortured; to be afraid, alone, hated, denied and deserted by his friends. It's all there in the Gospels for you to read. So whatever happens to you - that has already happened to God. God knows; God forgives; God loves.

The whole of Ascension shouts aloud to me, that Jesus Christ, who Christians call The Son of God, is lifted high to the throne of God, (another metaphor); he knows and cares about each and every one of you. Because of Ascension, you even dare to come close to God; and one day you will be with God.

There is something else to say and it is this. Ascension says that there are two worlds. There is the natural world, the one you live in now. It is all you touch and feel, hear and see. Truth to tell, you are a bit stuck in it - we all are. Most of you probably happen to live in a rich and well fed and affluent part of it. Do not be tempted to think however, that your search for success, or power or to have more than someone else, or to be popular and well liked is ... the end of the story. There is another world. It is a world you enter through music, ...through art, ... through prose or poetry, ... through great architecture, ... through Holy Places. It's a world so difficult to measure because you have to use words like ... love and goodness, or indeed hate and evil, a world of laughter and tears, sorrow and joy, beauty and ugliness

Ascension speaks about this *other* world. It is a world only completely open to you and me when we die. The Christian faith and its servant, the Church, opens a small window so that you can see through. You see with the eyes of faith, not an easy faith such as you might casually drift into at Christmas time. .

A story to end. Now an old man, he grew up on the slopes of one of the Alps. Often, when he was young, he climbed the mountain and spent a cold bleak night in order to see the glorious sunrise. Now in later life, a cable car passes close to his house and he sees tourists sitting in their boxes being carried to the top to see the view. The difference between those who climbed the hard way and those who went up by cable car was this: 'The view is the same but the vision ... and the understanding ... is different.'

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let me share a moment of Prayer with you.

Ascended Christ,
today we celebrate both your physical absence,
because you ascended
and your continued presence with us,
through your Spirit.

At this time in world history,
we are experiencing 'physical absence':
from loved ones, from friends,
from work, from leisure,
from congregating, from touch.
This 'physical absence' is real,
we experience it,
we understand what it feels like,
and Lord, it hurts.

Yet, there is also a 'presence'.
We don't always realise it, notice it,
understand it, or accept it,
but 'a presence' is there in abundance.
It is called Love,
and whether it is the love of a loved one,
the love of a friend or neighbour,
or the love of a stranger -
where ever we experience and feel trustworthiness,
caring, helpfulness,
supportiveness, kindness,
generosity, patience -
we feel presence.

Ascended Christ,
there is a saying from Scripture
that often we forget to remember.
It goes like this:
'God is love,
and those who live in love
live in God
and God lives in them'.

[1 John 4.16]

Now there is presence.

May we be grateful
that you *are* no longer confined in one body;
nor confined to one place,

to one time.
Wherever we are,
you are there;
wherever love is,
you are there;
though we may not know it,
may have forgotten it,
may not want it,
you *are* there.
Amen.