

Homily: Ascension of the Lord 2021

Yesterday, while I was watching the news, I saw a correspondent being interviewed outside the Houses of Parliament. Behind him there was a man with a large placard which read, "Jesus Christ will return soon." He was at least partly right – we certainly know that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead" – we profess this in the Creed, Jesus Himself taught us this, and the angels in the first reading today make the same promise. But as for when Jesus will come back, no one knows. It could be soon, it could be millions of years away. Jesus tells us today: "It is not for you to know the times or dates that the Father has decided by His own authority". He does not want us to predict or even to speculate about when He will return in glory.

Perhaps the Lord teaches this because He knows that if we spend too much time and energy wondering when He will return in glory, we will miss His coming to us now. Jesus is not an absent God; His return to the Father at His ascension is not a departure from earth so much as the beginning of a new way of being with us. The risen Lord promised: "I am with you always, yes, to the end of time." At the end of today's Gospel we're told that Jesus "was taken up into heaven: there at the right hand of God He took His place". This is a gift to us: He is seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us, to watch over us and bless us. But there is more. The apostles, we are told, then went out, "preaching everywhere, the *Lord working with them*." He has not left them at all; He has not left His Church; He has not left us. He remains close, but in a new way. He is present on earth, whilst being seated at the Father's side in heaven. And that means, in some way, that heaven and earth are brought closer by the Lord's ascension.

St Luke's account of the Ascension in today's first reading says that Jesus was "lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took Him from their sight." This detail is filled with promise. Many times in Scripture a cloud indicates the presence of God. A pillar of cloud led the Israelites through the desert after they had escaped slavery in Egypt; a cloud descended on Mount Sinai when Moses met God there, and also on the Tent of Meeting where Moses would speak with God. At the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John heard the Father's voice come from the cloud which overshadowed them. The cloud is a sign that God is with us: Jesus is no longer visible in human form, but He has not left us.

Jesus entering the cloud is also a sign of our redemption. If the cloud represents God, we see here Jesus returning to the Father, where He was before time began. But something has changed: Jesus has come to earth and has taken human nature to Himself. Now, He returns, taking that nature with Him. Human nature is being redeemed, is being carried into the presence of God. Heaven is being opened for us. At one time we belonged in heaven no more than we belong in the clouds; but now, Jesus returns to the Father and humanity is carried into the mystery of God Himself.

If we imagine the scene of the Ascension we could be tempted to think of the journey of our Lord in way that's too physical, too simplistic. It's true that the risen Body of Jesus was lifted up from the earth, but not to travel to some far-flung corner of the universe: Jesus

has entered heaven. Heaven is not a place in the cosmos: we would never find it by travelling in a spaceship! It's beyond our universe; it's a 'place', a state of being, only accessible by following Jesus, who has come from heaven to earth and now returned, carrying human nature with Him. The journey to heaven can only be a spiritual one, even if it will lead, ultimately, to the redemption of our bodies as well as our souls. To know Jesus now is not to see Him with physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith. To be in His presence is not to stand alongside Him in a human body, but to recognise His presence in the sacraments, in His Word, in the Body of Christ which is the Church. The angels who appear after the Lord's ascension ask the apostles: "Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking into the sky?" In truth, if we want to see Jesus, it's not our eyes we need to raise to heaven so much as our minds and our hearts. That wonderful old definition of prayer – raising our hearts and our minds to God – teaches us so much about where to find Jesus. We are not to daydream, looking at the sky, but to recognise One who is closer to us now than He was when He walked the face of the earth. Our eyes cannot see into the cloud, but through our faith, we can enter more deeply into the mystery, and by this path make our journey to heaven in the footsteps of our Lord.

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