

Homily: Ascension Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020

Last year I celebrated this feast, with some of you for company, in Assisi. I'm sure those of you who were with us on the parish pilgrimage remember it well. It worked out perfectly: on Ascension Day our timetable included a visit to the Carceri, the hermitage on Mount Subasio where St Francis and his brothers used to spend time in quiet prayer, away from the business of the town below. I can still picture very well our journey up the hill: the slightly too enthusiastic Italian taxi drivers who took us up the twisting mountain road, and the final path we walked from the road up to the hermitage. As we walked, we had some lovely views of the plain below, and indeed the clouds below – there was a fair amount of low cloud around that day. It felt, in a certain way, like we were in union with the Lord, ascending above the clouds, just as He did on this day.

In a certain sense, of course, that is absolutely true. Jesus ascends to heaven today in His human body: human nature, and a human body, enter into heaven for the very first time. It is a sign of our final calling: the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. So this is a feast of hope: our hope of salvation. It's also a feast which tells us something about the present too, because it teaches us of the new ways in which Christ is present in our world. Jesus told the disciples on the mountain in Galilee: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me". He has authority over everything, not only in the next life, but in this world too. And if He has authority, He must be present, He must be here to exercise that authority. A king who is absent from His kingdom really has no authority at all. But Jesus is not absent. He is in heaven, it's true; but He is also here on earth, as He promised: "I am with you always, yes, to the end of time." Present in heaven and on earth, the Lord has authority over both.

Today's first reading includes the almost comical image of the disciples staring up into the sky after the Lord has ascended. At one level, it's a sign of their love. Perhaps you've had the experience of waving goodbye to a loved one who is leaving for some time, and watching until they are completely out of sight. And even then not wanting to move. The apostles have grown to love the Lord, and they rightly watch until they can see Him no more. It's interesting that Acts simply tells us, "a cloud took Him from their sight". It does not say that He left them, only that they could no longer see Him. The phrase reminds me of the encounter at Emmaus, where St Luke simply tells us that, as they recognised Jesus at the Breaking of Bread, Jesus "had vanished from their sight." He did not leave them. He stayed with them, but was no longer visible.

Perhaps for this reason, the two men in white who appear at this moment of the Ascension ask the disciples: "Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky?" They are perhaps the same two who appeared at the empty tomb and asked, "Why look among the dead for One who is alive?" Here, as then, they simply point out: you're looking in the wrong place. Do not look to the sky, but look for the Lord where He is to be found now, in the ways He makes Himself present on earth now. No longer confined by a human body, He is present in many new and wonderful ways, but ways visible only by the eyes of faith.

In today's second reading St Paul says this to the Ephesians: "May God enlighten the eyes of your mind" – an enlightening which enables us to see future hope, certainly, but surely also to see the presence of Jesus in our world today. This enlightening is a work of the Holy Spirit, whose coming we await at Pentecost. Over the coming days we make our novena, asking for a renewal of the Spirit's gifts in our lives and across the whole Church. It's no accident that, just before He ascended, the Lord Jesus promised: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth."

And so it has turned out. God's faithful people, those who believe in and witness to the risen Lord, have indeed gone to the ends of the earth. The name of Jesus, who has authority over all things in heaven and on earth, is known across the world. May He renew the gifts of the Spirit within each of His followers, that He may be ever more widely known and loved, and that His reign, His kingdom, may be ever more clearly manifest.

And so, in a certain way, we play our part in fulfilling the words the Lord spoke through St Paul in today's second reading: God has made Jesus, "as ruler of everything, the head of the Church, which is His Body, the fulness of Him *who fills the whole of creation.*" It is partly by the presence of the faithful, the disciples of Jesus – us – that He fills the whole of His creation. The Church is His Body, His mystical Body; and we, its members, are present throughout the world.

What a wonderful truth it is! Christ has ascended, Body and Soul, into the glory of heaven; yet His mystical Body is still present on earth, especially where two or three gather in His name. He, the eternal Word of God who took flesh in the Virgin Mary, has gone back to His rightful place with the Father; yet He, the eternal Word of God, is present whenever the Bible is read or heard, anywhere in the world. He, the Lamb of God, sacrificed for our salvation, raised from the dead and now glorified, occupies His and the Father's throne in the heavenly city; yet He, the Lamb of God, slain and risen, is made present at every altar when the Mass is celebrated. This is the beauty of the Ascension: the Lord takes our humanity to heaven, yet does not abandon us on earth. He is with us always: our strength, our life, our hope.

And so I think back to Ascension Day last year, to Mount Subasio high above Assisi, above the clouds; and I think of the Mass we celebrated there. There, on that mountain, we were with the Lord. Above the clouds, with Jesus, present in the Church, present in His Word, present in the Eucharist. Above the clouds with the Lord: a reality for us already on this earth, but also a beautiful image, a beautiful promise, of our destiny: eternal life, body and soul, shared with Him in the heavenly kingdom.

Fr Andrew

