

The Ascension is like one of the bittersweet events that we all encounter at some point in our lives. It is a goodbye that you know is coming, one that you have prepared for, but still do not want to occur – even if you know the person you are saying goodbye to is moving to a better place. It is an experience that can be linked to the grief surrounding death, but it is more common than that.

The experience of the Ascension for the disciples is like fair welling your child or your lover or your best friend – someone you love and care about deeply – who is going forward to fulfil their greatest dream or destiny. You know it is the right thing for them, you know it is a wonderful thing to celebrate, you know that it will bring other wonder experiences and events in the days and weeks and even years to come – but there is still a little or even big part of you who is full of grief, and you are trying helplessly not to show it.

The disciples have been with Jesus for over three years – some of his followers have know him since they were children. They have come to believe that all that he is saying is true. They have lived with the pain of watching the trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem. They have come to terms with the joy and surprise of having Jesus appear to them after the resurrection – and now after such a short time – they have to let go again. They have to allow Jesus to return to heaven so that their story is fulfilled and also so that Holy Spirit might come and be with them forever.

It is such a strange moment for them – such a roller coaster of emotions. Are they filled with amazement and joy, or grief and longing? Either way it is an experience they would want to share with others. In the Acts version of the Ascension Jesus followers are left *gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven<sup>1</sup>.*' They seem to be frozen in this strange moment – a little like waving a car goodbye and realising that you are standing on the street waving to something that has been gone for a while. There is an element of shock in their behaviour.

The Luke account however is much more buoyant - *While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53 and they were continually in the temple blessing God<sup>2</sup>.* This version seems more in line with celebration – a group of people ready to wait and look for the coming of the spirit. A time of anticipation and hope.

I wonder how we approach the story of the Ascension and Pentecost? Are we standing looking up, a little in shock, a little disbelieving? Or are we like those who danced in celebration – longing for what was to come next? I suspect we are a combination of both – and each year at this festival we may approach it with a

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 1: 10-11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24: 51-53

different feeling depending on the life experience we bring to our theological reflection on these texts at this time.

The importance of the Ascension in the story of Jesus used to be understood clearly – until recently Ascension Day which fell last Thursday, was a day for half day closing – for schools at least – they would gather in the morning to celebrate and then have the rest of the day off. The first and the last school I taught at in London still kept this tradition!

Somehow in recent years we have lost its importance – in our own parish we no longer have a special service on the actual day – rather we transfer the event to a Sunday in the hope that more of us can be together to celebrate.

The Ascension in so many ways marks the end of the human part of Jesus as he ascends and once again is fully divine.

It also marks the end of our Easter Journey, a time that reminds us of Jesus movement from Earth to Heaven – we start by being reminded of the disciples' vulnerability – their humanity. A committed group of followers who had faithfully journeyed with Jesus in his life, have come to not only know him but to trust and believe in the power of God have now witnessed his death. An event that even with all their faith would have broken them. They had not only lost a friend in death; but they also had to come to terms with the fact that Jesus execution meant that their lives, their beliefs too were now under threat. This constant need to be vigilant because it was likely that their execution would be next must have been exhausting. It also meant they knew vulnerability in a way that many of us thankfully never will. They knew what it meant to be under constant surveillance - to know that many wanted you dead.

And then in the midst of this reality Jesus rises from the dead and appears to them, and encourages them once more to face their fears, to embrace their vulnerability and to have the courage and convictions of their faith to keep believing in God.

After Jesus had spent time with them, he opens the scriptures to them and prepares them to understand that in the end they will not be left alone, God will send the spirit to be with them – and they will be able to trust in the spirit who will be God them in their lives.

The biggest reassurance that Jesus gives is that the spirit will come and live in our midst. Sadly, there is little that fleshes out what this might mean. Paul of course talks about gifts of the spirit and the nurturing of them. But sometimes there seems little written that might help us understand this important relationship. Early Theologians also have a tough time helping us to embrace what this gift means in terms of our understanding of God at times. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson says, "Perhaps at the end of their long treatises, they simply got tired." Sometimes, they forgot about the Holy Spirit all together. "This is a shame," says Johnson, "for what

is being neglected is nothing less than the mystery of God's personal engagement with the world ... the mystery of God closer to us than we are to ourselves." <sup>3</sup>

The Spirit is something rather than nothing. We only need to look at the life of Jesus to see where the Spirit has been. And when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, he said: "Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." From now on, Jesus says, I will be with you in the power of the Spirit. Though I am leaving, you will not be left alone. This is staying power.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is introducing his own new narrative – the mystery and the personal engagement of God in the world is the spirit. It is ever-present in our midst. In the coming week, as we prepare for the feast of Pentecost we are invited to look out for where the spirit is at work.

I have been thinking a lot about this during the week – where do we see the spirit? I have had quite an eclectic week and so it seemed appropriate at several points to stop and reflect on God's presence within the places where I found myself.

On Friday evening I had been invited to speak as part of the Community Iftar at Isalmia School next door. I shared a reflection on what it means to love our neighbour as ourselves – the last commandment which Jesus gave us. It is a commandment which so often is witness to the work of the spirit. For to truly love our neighbours we must honour who God created us to be – and share love from that place. We are good neighbours when we allow each other to flourish – evidence of the spirit at work.

The spirit of God is present in many of our conversations and work, often even when we don't realise it. The spirit carries and sustains, embraces and hold; inspires and comforts.

The Spirit that anointed Jesus anoints us, still breathes with us and surprises us. Still reshapes the community called the church. If we forget and imagine that we're in this all by ourselves, if we trust only in our own efforts, we may lose sight of God in our midst – or even of the comfort and strength which God is holding us.

The next 7 days – the period between the Ascension and Pentecost – is a special time in the church calendar – and a time to focus our prayers on the need for the life of the spirit in the world today. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York now promote this time as 'Thy Kingdom Come'. They encourage all the church to pray for the peace, solidarity, mystery and intimacy which is offered with God in the spirit. To pray that Jesus narrative of love and compassion for our neighbours and within our community might embrace the whole world. May this be our prayer also. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2850](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2850](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2850)