

Ascension

16 5 10

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that as we believe your only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
to have ascended into the heavens,
so we in heart and mind may also ascend
and with him continually dwell.

My text may be found in Acts chapter 1 and verse 9: 'As they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.'

Where would the early Christians living in Jerusalem have gone to celebrate the feast of the Ascension? The answer lies in our gradual hymn, 'Once in Royal David's City'. It's unusual to sing a Christmas carol in May even if the weather has been unseasonably cold of late but that carol, which encapsulates the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus at Bethlehem, points to the interesting fact that his ascension into heaven used to be celebrated at the place where it was believed that Jesus came down from heaven.

Last month, we were privileged to have the opportunity of having our Bishop, the Right Reverend Dr Geoffrey Rowell, with us. The reason was our service of Confirmation. The presence of our Bishop is a reminder that he is the principal pastor of our diocese and that, as your priest, I share with him the cure of souls in this place, i.e. the care of your spiritual well-being. Bishop Geoffrey is an

Oxbridge academic by training and experience, a church historian of note who must be one of the most widely travelled bishops in the Anglican Communion with a diocese stretching from Iceland to Vladivostok, from the Canaries to Turkey. Unsurprisingly, he is a fund of fascinating anecdotes and wonderful snippets of information hence the inspiration for today's choice of a carol in mid-May.

The life of Christ on earth could be summarised in five key events, five moments in history: Incarnation; Crucifixion; Resurrection; Ascension; Second Coming. He came down from heaven to be born of Mary in a stable in Bethlehem. He died on the cross on the hill of Golgotha outside the walls of Jerusalem. He rose again from the garden tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea. He ascended into heaven on a hillside outside Jerusalem. He shall come again one day to judge the living and the dead.

Our faith in God, which Christianity has shaped in us, is a belief in a God who is present in our lives. We believe in a God who is outside time and space, a being whose nature of being is so very different from us yet he makes himself known to us. The paradox of the unknowable making himself known is an essential tenet of our belief. The Incarnation is the process by which God the Father makes himself known through the presence of God the Son. And today we mark the end of that incarnation by celebrating his ascension into heaven.

I believe in a God who is present with us, not in an absentee landlord who stands apart from his creation. So the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven should give

me some grief, at least present me with a challenge to the assertion that Jesus Christ is Emmanuel – God with us.

But if we look at the gospel account of the resurrection, we find this surprising quotation, they ‘returned to Jerusalem with great joy’ (Luke 24 v32). Why were they so happy? Partly, I think because they had the evidence of their eyes that Jesus’ earthly ministry was complete that he had finished what he had come to achieve and that he was truly the Son of God, the face of God made manifest to them and through them to be made manifest to the world. Partly, I think they were happy because they were witnesses to the truth of his presence among them and they carried that truth as a sense of joy in their hearts and minds, something each one of them remembered and their memory of Jesus in their lives changed their lives forever.

The Ascension marks the end of Jesus’ earthly life in the flesh. The Ascension marks Jesus’ ascent into heaven to rejoin our Father – the image in the Creed is of the Son sitting at the right hand of the Father. But thankfully we are not bereft; we not left alone. God in Christ is still with us in the sense that the New Testament is a witness to him, a remembrance of his time with us. But the story of Emmanuel – God with us – does not end here. We stand poised on the Day of Pentecost, the Birth Day of the Church when God would be with us in the person of his Holy Spirit. And to that and to him we turn next Sunday.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

16th May, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Ascension

