

Ups and downs

28 5 17

O God, the king of glory,
you have exulted your only Son Jesus Christ
with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven:
we beseech you, leave us not comfortless,
but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us
and exalt us to the place
where our Saviour Christ is gone before.

Our text this morning may be found in today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1 and verse 9:

‘ . . . he was lifted up . . . ’

Last Thursday, Ascension Day. Next Sunday, the Day of Pentecost. Today, the Seventh Sunday of Easter or the Sunday after Ascension Day, whichever you prefer. By following the Christian calendar, in spiritual time for ten days we're being placed in a sort of limbo, a time of waiting patiently between Jesus ascending into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And, in the collect for today, we have that wonderful petition – ‘leave us not comfortless’. Bereft of the physical presence of Jesus and not yet anointed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the disciples, soon to be apostles, have to wait patiently for Jesus' promise to them at the end of Matthew's gospel to be fulfilled: that he would be with them always.

Well, more of the Holy Spirit next Sunday but today, I'd like to focus of the idea of Jesus ascending into heaven. The stained glass window at the back of our church behind the children's corner is a wonderful depiction of Jesus defying gravity, calmly ascending into heaven – a sunny day with cloud waiting to hide Jesus from the sight of the amazed disciples who are looking up and watching him leave them again.

The way we make sense of our world is fascinating. Up is good; down is bad. To be on a high is really to be enjoying yourself; to be on a low is to be miserable. Climbing the ladder to success is a nice image of being promoted; down in the dumps may be how you feel if you get the sack or made redundant. Heaven is above the earth; hell somewhere below. Now, it is not necessarily literally so but it is a great way of describing what is good and what is bad. The image of Heaven is a picture of a place up there, well beyond us, somewhere perfect, a paradise, a watered garden, full of light and shade, somewhere safe from all harm or worry in the presence of God our Father. The image of Hell is a picture of dark place down there, a gloomy pit, somewhere evil – hot, painful, smelly where we are separated from the presence of God, apart from him because of the wrong choices we made, our refusal to come to our senses, to cheer up and to return home to say sorry to our Father who wants us to be back with him.

Jesus rising up, disappearing into cloud, is a graphic way of describing Jesus returning to the place from which he has come. Each Sunday, in the creed, we say as much – **'he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.'**

But being up there in heaven does not mean that Jesus has gone for good or that he is ignoring us. The very next sentence of the creed is the promise of the Second Coming: **'He will come again in glory and his kingdom will have no end.'** No one knows when that will be though over the last couple of millennia, plenty of folk have predicted the end of the world. But whenever the world will end, there is still the promise that Jesus is with us always and I wonder how. Is it simply the stories of about Jesus that remind us of him ? Is it the teaching of Jesus that shows us how best to behave ? Is it the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives that that inspires and informs us, giving us energy, enthusiasm and joie de vivre because we are mindful of Jesus ?

And a last thought. There is a real difference between the Ascension of Jesus and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Jesus ascends to God by the grace of the God-given power that is his as the Son of God. Mary is drawn up into heaven by the love of God, her assumption the direct result of her being drawn up to God by his overflowing love for her.

So between two highs of the Christian faith – the Ascension and Pentecost – let me ask you, 'Do you feel on a high because of what we believe as Christians or does Christianity really depress you ?'

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

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's, Dinard
28th May, 2017*

