

Ascension, 31st May 2020. Online
Acts 1:6-14 and John 17:1-11

Father, open our minds and our hearts we pray, that we may see and know Jesus, the Christ, risen, ascended, glorified. Amen.

For some, I suspect for many of us, the Ascension is a strange idea, really hard to get our heads round. Jesus on the hill top, taken up to heaven in a cloud? What is that all about? And why should it matter? The problem is, that if we just think, "That sounds weird, that's a bit barmy", we're inclined just to ignore it, forget about it. After all, aren't the crucifixion and the resurrection the important bits? Isn't that where it all happens, so to speak? Is the Ascension just something tagged on the end of the Gospel, a way of closing the Jesus story?

There's rather more to it than that. The Ascension brings the life story of Jesus full circle. From this point on, Jesus will always be known as Jesus Christ. It's good to think about this title 'Christ': for example, why is our church in Oakworth Called 'Christ Church', not 'Jesus Church'?"

The Jesus story begins with the angel telling Mary that she is going to have a rather special baby. This new life begins in a way shrouded with mystery, the work of the Holy Spirit gradually forming Jesus inside his mother Mary until he makes his visible, physical appearance among us on this earth. The Word, the very essence of God, becomes flesh in the body of the human Jesus, as John puts it.

Fast forward to the Crucifixion and the Resurrection: that physical body is killed, but then Jesus appears to his friends in a new form. They can tell it is him, but he is clearly different. And remember the Easter story: Mary Magdalene comes looking for Jesus, actually meets him in the garden and thinks he's the gardener, until he speaks her name, and then she knows, without any doubt, that she is in the presence of the risen Jesus. And what does she do? She goes towards him, she wants to take hold of him, but Jesus says, 'No, don't touch me, don't grasp me, because I have not yet

ascended to the Father.' Something more is happening. This isn't the end of the story.

It's almost as if in these 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension, the life form of Jesus is moving in the reverse direction from when he was born. In the 9 months of gestation growing in the womb, Jesus' new physical life was forming; now that physical human form is being transformed back into the form he had with God the Father from the beginning of time. It's as though these 40 days mirror the pregnancy, like a pregnancy in reverse: just as during pregnancy parents are given time to adjust to the idea of the new life that is coming, now Jesus' friends are given time to adjust to the new life that they are experiencing with him, so that when he does finally go from their sight, they can be sure that he hasn't just disappeared off the scene, but rather that his transformation is now complete.

With the Ascension, any physical presence of Jesus is taken away, completely. Imagine how hard must that have been for his friends! And yet, at that final moment of physical separation, Luke tells us that they are full of joy and thanks to God! How do you account for that? It can only be because now they realise that their Jesus is indeed the Christ, come from God the Father, returning to the Father; that he has moved into a different dimension, a different way of being, freed from the limitations of a human body, and able now to be with them in a new way, with them always and everywhere. Jesus the man has become Jesus the Christ, who he is since the very beginning.

The Ascension is about the final reunion of what appeared to be separated for a while: Earth and Heaven, human and divine, matter and Spirit. They are again one.

There is much for us to ponder on in all this, not least the importance of physical presence. When Mary sees the Jesus she loves, the Jesus she thought was dead, her first instinct is to run and embrace him. When we lose a loved one, that physical presence is what we miss so much.

And right now, in this time of isolation, it is the physical presence of our loved ones that we miss so sorely, that we yearn for. As we 'gather' on a Sunday morning, each of us by our screen, we long to be able to be with one another, to see and talk to each other in the flesh.

And yet it is a strange and remarkable truth that there is a great sense of togetherness as we do this. There seems to be a real coming-together, which I feel, and I know others feel, even though we can't explain it. And this, I think, is what is happening through the Ascension.

The Ascension was the final stage of Jesus' human life, when the material world returned to its spiritual Source, as will happen with every human life eventually. It is because of Jesus' Ascension that we can know that He is with us now. As we allow his presence to be real in us, we are linked to one another, held in his embrace, as it were. The Communion of saints.

Jesus the Christ is the love and the power of God the Father. He showed us what that love and power are like while he was on earth. Now, released from human limitations, he is in everything, over, under, around everything, holding together the whole cosmos, present in everything. And we are in him, and he is in us.

And as we allow God's Spirit to take hold of us and remake us in the image of Christ, we glorify Jesus, we become fully and truly and deeply human, as he was, as God intends us to be. Now that the earthly life of Jesus the Christ has ended, we, like his first followers, can participate in the new life he promises and give him glory. Amen.

And we shall celebrate the coming of that new life next Sunday on the Feast of Pentecost!