

Ascension Day – 2020

As a Christian I like to go back to places where I have met with God in the past and where prayer has been valid for centuries. For me Whalley Abbey is such a place. It was here that I made my ordination retreats and received my ordination charge or commission from Bishop Stewart Cross.

Luke's Gospel ends with Jesus taking the apostles back to one of their familiar places, the Mount of Olives, where they had often stayed and Jesus had taught them the Lord's Prayer, and there he gives them his final charge or commission before being taken into heaven.

A few years ago I was standing there on top of the Mt of Olives, by the dome of the ascension – it's an unimpressive little canopy over a small rock which is said to bear the last footprint of Jesus before he ascended into heaven. I remember looking at this rather indistinct groove in the rock and thinking, 'That's a bit hard to believe!'

I think many people feel a bit like that about the story of the ascension altogether. The idea of Jesus gently lifting off from the earth and being taken up into the clouds may have inspired many artists, but is a stumbling block to us today – because we know, unlike people 2000 years ago, that heaven is not somewhere just out of sight above the clouds.

However that is to miss the point of this very important event, which marks the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus did not ascend into the clouds as an exercise in social distancing, or because he thought that was the way to get to heaven. Rather, Jesus was taken up into a cloud to demonstrate, in a dramatic and visual way his disciples would grasp, that he was finally leaving the earth and returning to the God the Father.

St. Luke records that, '*as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*'. The Jews of Jesus time were very familiar with the idea of God appearing in the form of a cloud – when

God appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai the mount was covered by the cloud of the glory of God. The Israelites were led through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud. When the temple was consecrated by King Solomon a bright cloud filled the temple and the sense of the presence of God was so great that the worship had to stop. And when Jesus was transfigured on another mountain a cloud had come and enveloped him as he talked with Moses and Elijah.

So when Jesus *was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*, the disciples would have had no doubt at all about what was happening. They would have understood very clearly that Jesus was leaving the earth and returning to the glory of the God the Father. No more were they to live from day to day, waiting for the next resurrection appearance. Being lifted up and taken into a cloud showed that this was the triumphant departure of the One who had risen from the dead, conquered death and opened the Kingdom of heaven to all believers.

I like to visualise the ascension as Jesus returning to bosom of the Father with the words on his lips, MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

But before Jesus ascended he gave his apostles a promise and a command. The promise was that they would receive power, when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And the command was that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea, in Nelson, Chorley and Blackpool and to the ends of the earth. (OK I added one or two of those names in!)

We give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit which was given at Pentecost, but the Ascension reminds us that the Spirit is given to us not so that we can feel special, but to empower us to witness to Jesus and point others to him.

The ten days between Ascension Day and Pentecost are now observed by Christians all around the world and from all the main denominations as a season or novena of prayer called Thy Kingdom Come.

The aim of this season is for each of us to pray each day for five friends who aren't yet Christians, praying that through our witness and the work of the Holy Spirit each may come into God's kingdom and know Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

There is no greater gift we could wish for a friend. As Archbishop Justin Welby has said, 'The best decision anyone can ever make, at any time, in any place, is to follow Jesus Christ.'

I'm making a little bracelet with five knots in it to remind me of the five friends I am going to pray for each day over the next ten days. Perhaps you might like to do the same?

To find out more about Thy Kingdom Come follow the link on your screen now...

End with Ascension hymn...Alleluia! Sing to Jesus! (verses 1-3)