



## Ascension Day 2009

What are we celebrating today? What is the Ascension all about? What is the significance of this day?

To understand this, we need to go back a bit and reflect on the forty days that come between Easter and Today. What had been going on that time? What was happening during those great days?

Jesus' earthly task had been accomplished. He had proclaimed the Good News, he had healed the sick and raised the dead to new life. He called the sinner to repentance and gave new hope to those in darkness. Finally he had, in obedience to his Father's will, submitted humbly to death, death on a cross. During this time he had to prepare the disciples. First, he had to prepare them for the coming ordeal of his arrest and crucifixion. It was not an easy lesson for them to learn. Peter, if you remember, was quick to protest: 'Heaven help us, that must not happen to you.' And if you also remember, this drew one of Jesus's sharpest rebukes in the Gospels: 'Get thee behind me Satan. You are an obstacle.' I for one would not have not wanted to be on the receiving end of that particular blast from the Messiah.

But he was teaching them a hard lesson: to prepare them for the reality of his approaching suffering and death. This was not something that could be dodged or changed. It was hard enough for Jesus, who prayed that the cup might pass him by; but hard, too, for the disciples, who were having to learn the true nature of sacrifice, of Messiahship, of the Gospel, of what it means to be a disciple: one who takes up the Cross and follows the way of new life through the narrow gate of suffering and death.

But that was before.

Now, after the resurrection, he is teaching them the next thing, the next lesson. Just as they had to grasp the meaning of the Cross, so now they have to come to terms with the reality of the resurrection. Again, a difficult lesson to learn. Think of how Thomas refused to believe; 'unless I put my hands into the wounds that the nails have made, unless I place my hand in the hole made by the spear, I refuse to believe'. Think of those who thought that they were seeing a ghost. Think of the lengths that Jesus went to to persuade them that this was no mass hallucination, no ghost, no collective madness: that Jesus was truly Risen in a glorified body; that the resurrection was just as real as the death that preceded it. 'Look, it is really me, not a ghostly me, but a real, flesh and blood me. I am here and death is defeated' This is the lesson he is teaching his disciples: doubt no longer, but believe.

After all, Jesus's work on earth is over; theirs is just begun. They have to go out and tell. But how can they tell the world that Jesus is risen unless they truly believe it? So Jesus is equipping them, opening their minds and hearts to the reality and the joy of resurrection. From being people of despair and fear, the disciples are becoming people of hope and courage. When that task is accomplished, Jesus returns to his Heavenly Father, returns to the heavenly realm, able to entrust the work of the Gospel to Eleven and, later, Twelve men, who can go out and say with conviction and joy: the Lord is Risen. He is risen indeed!

Oh yes, there is much more to say than that. They can say that the Lord invites us all to follow him, not just on the road of discipleship, but also to follow him into the heavenly realm. We dare to hope that, one day, we can follow him, the Way, the Truth and Life, to heaven itself, to be in the presence of the Father, to behold face to face what we only see now in a mirror dimly.

So the Ascension marks the end of Jesus's earthly presence. But he leaves with the promise of the Holy Spirit, who will continue to teach, to guide and to strengthen. He leaves having turned our eyes towards heaven, to our future home, the hope and destiny that lies before us. But he also turns our eyes outwards towards the world, where those who have not seen and not yet believe are to be found.

Archbishop Vincent Nicholls, in his sermon in Westminster Cathedral this week, spoke of the dangers of secularism and atheism in our today. He was absolutely right to do so. We, as Christian men and women, must, must, must be prepared, gently but firmly, to proclaim the hope that is in us and to resist those who would tell the world that faith is a dangerous deceit. Faith is no deceit: faith lifts us out of selfishness, it lists us out of ourselves; faith turns our eyes away from ourselves: first to God as the source of all that is good and beautiful and true; and also to each other, as creatures who have been made in goodness, beauty and truth, that is, in God's image.

Jesus, by ascending to his Father, has not deserted us. He has gone home. And, united with his Father, he can send his Spirit so that he can be everywhere on earth when we gather in his name. So, let us come down from the mountain, as did the disciples, let us go from here and praise God and continue his work.