**Address for 21st May 2020 Ascension Day**

*‘As Jesus blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.’ (Luke 24: 51)*

My father had many interests including gardening, making short-wave radio sets and photography. He was a keen amateur photographer and for a number of years was a member of his local Photographic Society and contributed to exhibitions. His abiding interest was in black and white photographs and I remember many an evening joining in with him as we developed and printed his creations in our spare bedroom which doubled up as a dark room.

There is a special skill in all photography – from composing the subject, determining the correct lighting and choosing the best paper through to the final production. In my father’s time these were called ‘pictures’ or ‘photos’. How times have changed! With the advent of computer photo-editing software ‘photos’ have given way to ‘images’. Though true of some photography it is just as likely now that what is produced is an image to convey a theme or subject or impression – the interpretation of which (like some modern art) lies in the eye of the beholder.

Today is Ascension Day, the day we recall our Lord’s entry into heaven. The forty days of Easter had been marked by his physical resurrection appearances but now things are different. As we heard in our gospel reading Jesus is taken away, out of sight, from the disciples.

What image do we have of this event? What interpretation or representation can we give to it?

Some of you may recall those Children’s Bibles where, alongside the biblical account, there was a colour image of some legs and feet disappearing through the clouds! I have to confess I was never fully persuaded by such an image. In our benefice we do, of course, have the lovely east window at St Mary’s, Haxby, where, if you look closely you can see how, in the depiction of the Ascension, the artist has shown the imprints of Jesus’ feet on the grass.

So in what other ways do we portray the Ascension?

Well perhaps as ‘ascendancy’.

Throughout my school, university, postgraduate and professional years I must have taken hundreds of exams – and I expect you have too! There is an expectation in academia – indeed in life generally – that we strive to ‘reach the top’ in exam results and careers.

Both as a student and a teacher I was part of this process.

This is the language of height, of achievement.

You may remember the cheeky interpretation of the song ‘My guy’ in the film ‘Sister Act’ in which the choir sang of Jesus being ‘the tops – the cream of the crop!’

There is another way of considering ascendancy: we look to the ‘top person’ in society.

In a monarchical arrangement this person is the King (or for many of us in our lifetimes in this country, the Queen.) So much of the language and imagery used to describe the Ascension uses the concept of kingship. The anointing for holy tasks is one of the key elements of the Coronation of our monarchs.

This should not be strange to us because in thinking of Jesus’ ascension it is part of the revelation of God’s kingdom that he came to earth to bring about – the kingdom of Love.

But this is a kingdom with a difference. The affirmation of faith we are using in our service today comes from one of the earliest ‘creeds’ in the letter to the Philippians. Christ did not claim equality with God, but emptied himself and was born in our human likeness. The Lord of life, earth, sky and sea was the King of love on Calvary.

So Ascension Day marks this transition in Jesus’ life and ministry – a life which has conquered death and assures us of the promise given of a new resurrection life. Jesus enters into an inheritance of the kingdom he ushered in – sitting at the right hand of God where his ministry of love, prayer and intercession continues. As our offertory hymn proclaims, we come before the great high Priest whose name is Love and who ever lives and pleads for us.

But we face the stark reality that this is the day we recall that Jesus withdrew physically from us.

Some churches and cathedrals mark the reading of the Gospel by a short fanfare – a recognition of the importance of the Gospel Reading and the message it contains.

You may have noticed that on a few occasions in our recent recorded worship over the past two months we have done the same.

Today is no exception – yet with a difference: no triumphant chords this time, rising to a glorious crescendo, but a fading away of the music to a contemplative silence. For on this day it has been our custom, after the Gospel reading, to extinguish the Easter Candle – a tangible representation of our Lord’s ascension. This is a poignant moment, and made even more so this year as we have not been able to gather in our church buildings for worship: this year’s Easter Candle has remained in its box, unlit. But this does not mean that the light of the risen Christ has deserted us. The candle’s flame is replaced by a plume of smoke rising heavenwards – a prayer, like incense, rising upwards, carried towards the heavenly sanctuary – to Jesus ‘seated at God’s right hand’ interceding for us.

I am reminded, too, of that wonderfully evocative music by Ralph Vaughan Williams ‘The Lark Ascending’ – free, boundless, carefree flight borne through the atmosphere’s currents. How wonderful might it be to experience that flight – especially after weeks of lockdown! Yet our Lord’s ascension has more to teach us, for such an experience is no escapism. We offer ‘praise to the holiest in the height’: but also in the depth there is praise.

I recall a fascinating series of lectures by one of my tutors on a teacher-training course.

His special subject was ‘creativity’ and it was enlightening to consider how the best conditions for creativity are often, perversely, those where there are boundaries (akin to the old adage ‘necessity is the mother of invention’). The creative process not only seeks to overcome those boundaries, but in doing so often pushes the boundaries outward. This is ascendancy over a situation: the series of ‘Good Friday’ and ‘Easter’ experiences which form us, mould us and are part of our everyday lives. We only have to think of the remarkable endeavour currently being taken by so many in medicine, industry, commerce and other sectors to find solutions to the current coronavirus situation, and to search for a cure or therapeutic outcome. Let us thank God for all their efforts and creativity, and continue to pray for them.

This is endeavour motivated by Love. It is an expression of God’s kingdom of Love, and one in which we all have a share – as a Church and in our individual lives and ministries.

Bishop John Robinson (a former Bishop of Woolwich) achieved a certain notoriety in the 1960’s, not least by the publication of his book ‘Honest to God.’ I recall some words of his, expressed in a different context, which I can perhaps paraphrase like this: ‘it doesn’t matter what view of ministry we have provided our view of the Church is a higher one; and it doesn’t matter what view of the Church we have provided our view of Kingdom is a higher one.’

Our lives and ministries, and the ministry of the Church, are first and foremost at the service of God’s Kingdom. This is something we are currently learning afresh as we contemplate many months (perhaps longer) of being a different kind of church, and of ‘doing’ ministry differently. Many people are finding this challenging. Being ‘rootless’ from our church buildings is like the absence the disciples must have felt when Jesus departed from them at his ascension, but he promised that he would not leave them, or us, ‘comfortless’. We are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, which we celebrate in nine days’ time at Pentecost: nine days (or ‘novena’) in which we can pray earnestly for the Spirit and ‘thy kingdom come.’ This is the time when we pray that the rule of Christ, his sovereignty and ascendancy, will be clearly seen on earth – that ‘his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

You may remember that, when asked, Jesus once replied that all blasphemies would be forgiven except that against the Holy Spirit. Why would this be? We can only guess his meaning, but I like to think that we declare our faith in the Holy Spirit ‘who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world. The blasphemy that is not tolerated would be against life itself: the Holy Spirit, the life-giver; the Spirit of potential and creativity; the Comforter (as ‘come-forth-ter’); the Spirit as the Revealer.

On this Ascension Day – so different from many we might have experienced so far – we must allow ourselves to be open to the prompting of God’s Spirit; that we pray earnestly for the coming of God’s kingdom; and that God, through his Holy Spirit will reveal to us in these coming days how we can creatively offer worship and praise worthy of His name; that ‘at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow’ and, in the spirit of our joint benefice mission how we ‘step out in faith with God and with each other in love and service to our local community and wider world.’

The Revd Martin Doe