

## Ascension Day 2020



### Gospel

*Matthew 28:16-20*

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; though some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

### Homily

*given for group sharing in a streamed Mass at Pusey House*

#### **‘I am with you always.’**

I am delighted to be able to be with you – and to have the opportunity to speak to live human beings! – on what to me is the most beautiful feast of the year. Not the most glorious perhaps: that honour, as St John Damascene says, is left to Easter, the ‘feast of feasts’. But the Ascension is definitely the most beautiful because it is both utterly simple and inexhaustibly deep.

Its utter *simplicity* is that humanity has been taken into God, into the ‘burning heart of reality’.

As Bishop Wordsworth’s popular hymn puts it, addressing Christ,

Thou hast raised our human nature  
in the clouds at God’s right hand.

‘Man with God is on the throne’, he continues, and ‘We, by faith, behold *our own!*’

So much for simplicity.

The depth can be seen if we make the connection between the Ascension and that other most beautiful Christian feast, Christmas. Descent and ascent: in them both we not only peer into the mystery of Jesus, but also into the mystery of our own truth and reality as human beings.

Because, if the *incarnation* affirms that God inhabits the earth, and the body of human flesh (in all its variety and vulnerability), then the *ascension* affirms that human flesh (in all its variety and vulnerability) is in the Spirit, and mankind inhabits the heavens. ‘He who descended’, says St Paul – ‘is the same one who also ascended ... to fill everything’ (*Eph* 4:10; cf 1.23; 4.6). When the human life in which God made himself visible, and audible, and tangible, disappears from the human world, our whole humanity goes with him – even the unlovely, resistant and wounded bits – into the heart of love, where alone it can be truly healed and transfigured. Therefore, ‘Be consoled, O flesh and blood, for in Christ you have taken possession of heaven and of God's kingdom!’ (Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 17).

2

This sermon can now go in one of two directions. Either I can fall into silence at the sheer wonder and audacity of what we are all contemplating. Or, I can go on for hours I promise you! I’m going to try to continue for just a few minutes more. (I say try in the sense of trying to keep your attention, because, as many people are discovering, the one big asset of worship via the internet is that *switching off* takes a lot less time and courage than *leaving church* if the worship or the sermon is not to your liking. I hope at least you’ll all stay on the call!)

In other years, alongside the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the Church is given a gospel passage from Mark or Luke, both of which, like Acts, explicitly describe Christ’s ascension. But this year the Church at large is reading Matthew, and he has *no such account*. But when the ascension account in Acts is combined with the final verses of Matthew’s gospel, as it is this evening, we are able to peer into the depths of this feast.

It is Matthew who evokes most fully what the new reality will be like for the disciples. Because he connects the total authority that the risen Jesus has been given in heaven and on earth, with his every-day presence with his followers until the end of the world.

In the Gospel passage Jesus appears on the mountain in Galilee, where the women told the disciples to go. There, faced by the Risen One, they bow down and worship. He is the *Kyrios* (the Lord) of the Church. On the threshold of being taken into God, and seated at the right hand of the Father, that Lordship is acknowledged on earth. The encounter is not totally free of doubt or hesitation on the part of the disciples. Even so, we all know the way in which doubt and hesitation can serve to *lead us* in the process of believing and obeying the Lord. We tend to use the word ‘Lord’ pretty casually, like a kind of devotional cap-doffing; but to men and women in the ancient world it meant the person whose decisions you had to abide by. The early generations of Christians *believed* that if Jesus of Nazareth was the Lord of heaven and earth, then no one could be lord *over* him, no one could overrule, annul him, or remove him; and that meant that his word and his new life must now shape their lives completely.

Jesus goes on to assure them that though he will go from their sight, he will not leave them. Taken up in the clouds (which is the language of scripture for being at the right hand of God) does not mean taken away. He will remain part of human history in and through them, and the mission he gives them. No longer do we simply believe ‘God is with us’ as the prophets taught and which we learn from his birth (*Is* 7.14, *Matt* 1.43; cf *Is* 41:10). We now have his own promise, ‘I am with you’. ‘I, your Lord and master (who know you, and are known by you) am with you ... *for ever*, as you teach and baptize and draw others into the orbit of the same authority and the same freedom, baptizing people and nations into the same life, *introducing* every human being to God through me.’

This is the distinctive image with which Matthew’s gospel *ends* – the image of a poor church, an obscure community of *poor believers*, being sent out, without ‘money, or resources, or means of support’ (*Mt* 10.9-10) to teach the Gospel by living it. They are not asked to preach their own words and wisdom; they have only to baptize and teach what Jesus commands (*Mt* 28.20). They have to be poor enough as to be able to shine with the presence of the Risen One – ‘decentred’ from their egos we would say, so as to be able to make room for his promise: ‘I am with you’, ‘I am in you’ (*Jn* 14.20). He remains with each of us and

guides the Church's journey at all times. He is alongside all who are poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for believing; all who are forgotten, marginalized, and victimized.

3

All these things happen of course, because Jesus is not, and never has been, alone. Completing his earthly mission and going to the Father, he goes to pray for us, to intercede continually at God's right hand. 'We have an Advocate with the Father', says St John in one of his letters, 'Jesus Christ the righteous'. But he has lived all his life, from his conception, and his baptism, with the in-dwelling presence of the 'Other Advocate', the Spirit of truth, whom St Basil calls Jesus's 'inseparable companion'. So as Jesus leaves our sight, he sends *his* inseparable companion to be *our* inseparable companion. The Ascension cannot be detached from Pentecost, any more than Good Friday can be detached from the Easter Day.

Brothers, Sisters, later in this Eucharist, I will feel, just like the majority of you have felt for over two months now, the hunger of not being able to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood, which is *also* to receive the Holy Spirit. We shall share instead in an act of spiritual communion together as Fr George receives the Sacrament. Let us pray that we may be filled by the same Spirit, our minds and hearts with him in heaven, our tongues and hands with him on earth.

### **Prayer**

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens, so we in heart and mind may also ascend, and with him continually dwell; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.