

Sermon for Ascension Day

The Dean considers the mystery of Christ's presence with us throughout time, both wounded and glorified.

Do you remember the agony of a long journey when you were a child?

It might be simply a matter of boredom,

but sometimes the frustration was greater,

a yearning to arrive at the longed-for holiday destination

or much missed friend.

The repeated cry, "Are we nearly there yet?"

answered with more or less degree of patience by the driver.

So much of Christian life could be represented by that cry.

The longing for God,

the yearning for closeness to Jesus,

that sense of "now but not yet"

of the presence of God.

For the disciples,

the event that we recall today

takes place in that period of uncertainty,

of remembered promises not yet fulfilled.

Before his death,

Jesus told them that he would send them

a comforter, an advocate, the Holy Spirit.

But this promise has not yet been fulfilled.

We read, not from the gospels, but from the Acts of the Apostles this evening.

The focus has moved from Jesus to the disciples,

to that fragile, traumatised group

still trying to make sense

of the death of their friend and teacher.

Perhaps it seems like a long time since that Sabbath day on which some of them had encountered the risen Christ.

We know there were other resurrection appearances, but we get the sense that these were unpredictable, uncertain.

The disciples don't understand how Jesus will be present with them now or in the future.

Today we join them staring up into the sky, trying to make sense of a disappearance that feels more permanent than his fleeting absences in the previous days.

It is easy to be distracted by this image, or by the unhelpful symbolism of the Ascension, the disappearing feet and rose tipped clouds of Baroque paintings.

Writers, artists, and indeed preachers, are grasping for images to describe a mystery. The mystery of Christ's presence with us whilst also present with the transcendent, universal, God of Creation, the God that Jesus called His Father and Our Father.

Trauma can debilitate and diminish us.

We have seen much of this in recent months, and today, the Dean of Jerusalem posted on social media:

Sitting in the Kidron Valley amongst Muslim, Christian and Jewish graves, looking towards the Mount of Olives.

According the St Luke's Gospel Jesus ascended from close by into heaven.

The graves brought home that in the Land of the Holy One we are living in days of death.

The appalling suffering caused by a strategy of starvation which followed a policy of decimation in response to the terrible events of October 7, means that deaths keep piling up in a furnace of pure misery.

The suffering peoples of these lands have cried out loud, long and hard but to no avail.

Jesus Christ, while on earth, heard the cries of those who suffered, he healed the sick of physical and mental illness, he raised the dead and he stood in the path of violent judgement of the vulnerable.

Christ is still the hope of all who suffer but his church on earth has not followed faithfully to act in the Way of Christ.

The healing and justice-making Christ ascended into heaven so that he could intercede on behalf of suffering and sinful humanity for the Godhead. While the kingdoms of this world have remained deaf to the hideous suffering of Palestinians, we know that Christ still hears the cry, 'Lord if you are willing you can heal me'. Christ's response was and is 'I am willing'.

The Kingdom of heaven hears but will the Church of Christ on earth hear too? And is it willing to act?

Let us not forget the traumatised people of Gaza today.

For the Christians among them, is Jesus present and ready to heal, or absent?

On this day, we remember that the disciples are not yet healed from their trauma.

They are still staring up at the sky.

Are they re-living the trauma of loss?

Terrified that Jesus has left them, never to return?

The Holy Spirit has not yet come, to seal the presence of God with them and to birth the church, the community of faith, love and hope that we will celebrate at Pentecost.

But we are on the way and there is learning on the journey.

Augustine of Hippo, the African theologian, who inspired the foundation of this community, wrote in a great sermon on the Ascension

"Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven;
let our hearts ascend with him.

Listen to the words of the Apostle:

If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth.

For just as he remained with us even after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

Christ is now exalted above the heavens,
but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we,
the members of his body, have to bear.
He showed this when he cried out from above:
Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?
and when he said:
I was hungry and you gave me food.
Why do we on earth not strive to find rest with him in heaven even now,
through the faith, hope and love that unites us to him?

While in heaven he is also with us;
and we while on earth are with him.
He is here with us by his divinity,
his power and his love.
We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth,
by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love.”

Augustine articulates
what the disciples cannot yet say.
God is *with us* in Christ
and we are *with God* in Christ,
through the unity that comes from baptism,
from the Eucharist,
through our membership of the body,
in the now and not yet of the church.

We are on our way to glory, but we are not there yet.

We have that promise, like the disciples,
because the wounded and traumatised body of Jesus
has been transformed into a glorified body,
folded once more into the mystery of the transcendent God
who is present throughout all time and space.

A contemporary theologian,
the scientist and Franciscan sister, Ilia Delio,
tells us that God Godself is still on the journey.
That God is emergent, evolving towards fulfilment, towards the fullness of
love.

When we look forward in hope,
we are looking in the same direction that God is moving.
Our yearning and longing is caught up in the love, hope and faith
which are also characteristics of God, Godself.

May that love, hope and faith transform us as it did those first disciples.
Amen.