

Sermon 6th after Easter-Sunday after Ascension Day

Dear Archbishop, Bishop Ian, Revd Fathers and brothers and sisters in Christ. I wish you all well on this the Sunday after Ascension and trust that the current lockdown is gradually coming to an end so that you may meet your family and friends soon.

Ascension day in 2020 is remembered on Thursday 21st May. As a significant religious day however it is not now celebrated as in the past-I remember as a young school boy there were holidays then, such as Ascension day, that we looked forward to- holidays that now no longer exist-as a child the significance of the holiday was not important, only the fact that you didn't have to go to school that day! Inevitably life has changed since then, for children who have been unable to attend school because of the pandemic may now be more anxious to return!

Ascension Day for many Protestant churches is not recalled in the same way that the Crucifixion or the Resurrection are remembered, although I believe that In France it is still a public holiday and strictly remembered in the Catholic Church. For many countries now, however, Ascension is a sort of tailpiece, an addendum. It doesn't seem to make as much of an impact on the ordinary Christian.

Yet it should be seen as a significant day because it marks the end of the period of Jesus' 40 days on earth since the Resurrection. During those days the disciples experienced Jesus' presence on several occasions in human form doing ordinary human things- He ate with them, He drank with them, He spoke with them, He invited them to touch His hands and feet, telling them that a ghost does not have flesh and bones.

Depending upon your view point you can regard the Ascension as an end in itself, the end to Jesus' ministry on earth, or you can regard it as an open ended look towards the future. Yes the Ascension is the end of Jesus' mission on earth-the last cycle of His life, death, then resurrection, but it also points the way to the future.

At the point of the Ascension, Jesus blessed the Apostles and at the very time of doing so he was parted from them and carried up into heaven. The Holy Gospel according to St Luke describes this with the words ...”And they worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: and were constantly in the temple praising and blessing God”.

When Jesus died the disciples were in turmoil, they were distraught, yet after he ascended the mood was quite different, they were full of confidence and their deep spirituality was in evidence. How can this change be accounted for? On both occasions Jesus had left them- what was the difference? At the second time of leaving one would have thought that it would have left the disciples more upset than the first time because of the obvious permanency of it. However, it was as if somehow the time the disciples had spent with the risen Lord had transformed their way of thinking, so that they were no longer afraid and anxious-they now knew for certain that life continues after death.

Jesus knew that it was up to the disciples to forge the new future without Him-they were less fearful of the task after the Ascension. Isn't it the same today for the person who meets and lives with Christ who leads a transformed life and no longer fears what lies beyond the earthly life?

Prayer enables us with the help of God the Holy Spirit to fulfil our purpose in life with the same confidence and enthusiasm that the disciples had after they had witnessed the Ascension.

God loves and cares for each of us as individuals, and those today who believe in and live with the risen Christ will receive the comfort and support necessary to fulfil His work.

The open endedness of the Ascension and its implications for our further action is summed in the words of St Theresa of Avila-"You have now no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes showing your compassion to the world; ours are the feet with which you go about doing good; ours are the hands with which you are now to bless the world". Amen.

Dean Brian Roberts