

Up, up and away? The Ascension – Acts 1: 6 – 11



To be physically separated from someone you love can be painful. During the lockdown, we have missed the contacts with family and friends that were a regular part of life beforehand. We give thanks for the digital means that allow us to keep in touch, hear one another's voices and even see one another's faces, but it's not the same as being together in the flesh.

Saying goodbye is hard, especially if you don't know when or if you will meet again. When I look across the Mersey at the Liverpool waterfront, the words of the old song often come into my mind: "It's not the leaving of Liverpool that grieves me, but, my darling, when I think of thee." Many people have set sail from that quay, heading for far-off lands, aware that they might never see their dear ones again.

The hardest separation is that of bereavement. Even if you believe that in the life to come you will be reunited, the pain of knowing that you will never again in this life see someone you love is intense.

There was a finality about the event we call the Ascension. How exactly that event took place we cannot know. St Luke gives it just one sentence (Acts 1 verse 9), which suggests to me that it was beyond description in earthly terms. It is clear, though, that the disciples recognised it as the end of their time with the physical Jesus. Since His resurrection they had seen Him come and go on a number of occasions, but this time He had gone permanently.

The followers of Jesus, however, do not appear to have spent time looking back to the good old days when they could see Him, hear Him and touch Him. As far as we can tell, after His departure they did not grieve over the pain of separation. The explanation for that is to be found in Acts chapter 2, which tells of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus in the flesh, God incarnate, was no longer present with His followers, but they knew the Spirit of God was with them, and in them, closer than their own hands and feet. The Spirit did not come and go, but was always there, wherever they were. The Ascension had not deprived them of the presence of the Living God but had made it possible for them to experience His presence in a new way.

The Holy Spirit is still present in and among the followers of Christ today. At the moment we may not be able to meet physically in our church buildings, but the Church of Christ is still very much alive. The Spirit is still active in the Church, inspiring and empowering all the work that the Church continues to do in order to share the love of its Living Lord with the world. In our praying, giving, serving and loving, we go on declaring that the Lord is here and His Spirit is with us.

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the Lord Jesus Christ, who shared our life, our joys and our pains, and died to conquer sin and death. We thank You that He was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven and lives forever to pray for us. We thank You, too, that through the Holy Spirit, He is constantly with us, at work in our lives.

Help us, we pray, to serve Him here on earth and to worship Him with You and the Holy Spirit all the days of our life and throughout eternity, for His name's sake. AMEN

- Rev. John Barnett

Image: *The Ascension of Christ* (1304-06), by Giotto (c.1267-1337).