

## Sermon: Deanery Ascension Day Service 2020

*Sing: "He's coming home. He's coming home. Christ is coming home"*

As we gather this evening to celebrate Christ's ascension, his return to the Father's side in his eternal Kingdom, this paraphrase of the well-known football anthem springs to mind. I have this vision of the angels and all the blessed throng chanting this (and more recognised sacred music) as they receive their Lord back from his sojourn here on earth. Perhaps they are cheering like at a football match. Perhaps they are bowed low in reverence and adoration. Perhaps they are running to greet the ascended Christ, just like we would've run to greet a friend or family member we hadn't seen for a while prior to these days of social distancing.

The Scriptures don't tell us what actually happens in the heavens. They leave it to our imagination and the traditions of the Church which developed. But as we have heard, the Scriptures focus on how Jesus' ascension was experienced by his first disciples. And from these descriptions many artistic interpretations have formed: from feet dangling from cloud painted ceilings, foot prints in the ground as if they were the last impression of Christ on earth or the launch pad from which he sprang, to the stained glass image in the East window, here at St John's, behind me.

And like many of the key moments of Jesus' life here on earth, mystery surrounds his ascension. We don't know how he ascended and how he was received, just like we don't know how he was raised to life again on Easter morning; we don't know for certain how he was conceived or how he performed the multiplicity of miracles we read about in the Gospels. But the 'how' is not the important issue. The 'why' is what we need to grapple with. Behind each of these events there is meaning and truth waiting for us to discover, and throughout the Church's year we spend time reading, discussing, exploring each of these mysteries. 40 days on from Easter comes our celebration of the Ascension.

So 'why' the Ascension? Firstly, let me state that Jesus' return to the side of the Father is not some useful fable, made up by the early Church, to explain away the absence of Jesus' body here on earth. It is a divine mystery at the heart of all that we believe. For we believe that God, in Jesus, became incarnate and lived among us – sharing our lives; our joys; our sorrows; our deepest thoughts and concerns – so that he could not only lead us to a new and living relationship with the Father, but also so that he could bring the whole of human experience into the heart of the divine nature. Jesus' return to the heavens, his Ascension, brings you and me, and all of humanity, once more into the consciousness of God's very being where... we are fully known, unconditionally loved, and forgiven without limits.

But Jesus' ascension does more than that: it also paves the way for our ascension to the halls of heaven. Just as we believe that we have a share in the new and resurrected life Jesus won for all when he conquered the powers of death and hell by his mighty resurrection, so by his glorious ascension we, as heirs of the promise, have a share in, and a dwelling place prepared for us in heaven. Christ's ascension makes it possible for us to be with the Holy and Blessed Trinity, in paradise, where sin and death are no more. Christ's ascension enables us to believe with confidence that those who have gone before us in faith are not lost eternally but are to be found in the majesty of heaven and in his very being.

At a time of global pandemic with so much death, and pain, and sadness around us this is the comfort we need to hear: We shall live because Christ gives us his risen life. We shall rise because Christ shows us the way into the heart of God. We shall be comforted because the Holy Spirit has been lavished upon us and will not leave us.

As the psalmist bids in psalm 47, the psalm appointed for today:

*"God is gone up with a merry noise, the lord with the sound of the trumpet.*

*O sing praises to God, sing praises"*

Let us join the angels, and all the host of heaven, in singing praise to God this night, for ...

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

The Reverend Michael Macey  
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