

Acts 1. 1 – 11
Luke 24. 44 – end

The Ascension Day

Fr Alex

We've been on quite a journey in our Church calendar, and today in a manner of speaking, we reach our destination.

It started nearly fourteen months ago as we celebrated the Feast of the Annunciation – God choosing to intervene in his creation in an unprecedented way, by becoming part of it himself.

The Angel Gabriel spoke the joyful words to Mary, and her womb became the dwelling place of the eternal Word of God.

Nine months later, at Christmas, we celebrated the birth of Christ – true God and true human. We remembered the visit of the Magi and their significant gifts; we recalled his presentation in the temple and the prophecy of Simeon.

Then we followed him in his adult ministry. We answered his call to repentance, and for forty days of Lent, shared in spirit in his sufferings and temptations.

We walked with him to his passion and wept with Mary at the foot of the cross. We celebrated with joy his glorious resurrection and the fulfilment of his promises.

And now, forty days later, we celebrate his ascension into heaven. And of course we have already embarked on this great journey through the calendar once again, as we marked the Annunciation again about six weeks ago.

But is it really the right word to use today, to 'celebrate?' Why would we want to celebrate the moment when the risen Lord Jesus, God walking amongst us, leaves the earth, and goes away from us?

I wonder if you've ever been to an airport departure area, and witnessed the moving scenes that often play out there.

I remember once seeing a couple in floods of tears as they hugged their adult child, and their young grandchildren goodbye. Evidently the young family was emigrating to a far-off place. Perhaps you've been in that situation yourself.

No doubt they had known this moment was coming for some time. They probably had marked this time with plenty of 'last' experiences – maybe they had shared a last dinner together the night before.

But no amount of preparation could stop the tears flowing as they reached out for one last hug, at the last moment they had left together. There was certainly no joy there.

The disciples had been through something similar. Jesus had been telling them for some time that he was going to leave them. By degrees he warned them that in fact he would suffer horribly and die.

They had had their last meal together, and heard his final words to them. They'd gone through the despair of Good Friday and the bewildering joy of Easter Day, only to have to say goodbye to him *again* as he goes back to his Father.

But instead of mourning and weeping, St Luke tells us that they worshipped him, "and returned [from Bethany] to Jerusalem with great *joy*; and they were continually in the temple blessing God."

Why this joyful reaction to losing their master and their friend?

Earlier I mentioned that today is the destination of our long journey through the Church calendar. And that's because the Ascension of Jesus shows us the destiny of humanity.

Humankind has been on a great journey ever since we were created and fell away from God: God has been calling us back to himself, ever closer and closer, through the patriarchs, through the prophets: to the point of becoming human himself, in the person of Jesus.

Jesus came down to earth to share in our humanity – but when he returned to his Father in heaven, he didn't cast it off again; he raised humanity up into heaven, to share in his divinity.

The ultimate destination for those who follow Christ is to be with him, in God; our humanity made perfect, as he is perfect.

This destiny is the "great hope" that St Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians: our share in the "riches of [Christ's] glorious inheritance among the saints," and "the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."

This is why the disciples were so joyful on this day, and why we share in that joy too.

They knew that Jesus had to leave them in that one place and time, so that he could enter every place and time. They had to let go of his earthly body, so that they could become his body in the world, the Church, to continue his great mission and share this good news with all people. They had to lose their experience of his humanity, so that they could come to experience his divinity.

They finally understood and believed all that he told them: that he meant it when he promised to "send upon [them] what [his] Father promised" so that they would be "clothed with power from on high."

And so they returned to Jerusalem with joy, and prepared themselves in prayer for the promised coming of the Spirit.

We will mark this at the end of our service as we go to the font, our liturgical Jerusalem for the evening, and pray again for the gift of the Spirit in our own lives, to inflame our faith.

I pray that you may be richly blessed in this holy time before Pentecost. And may you come to know afresh the creating and transforming presence of God within you, in the gift of his Spirit. Amen.