

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Ascension Day**

**26<sup>th</sup> May 2022**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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The Ascension of Christ takes us into the language of mysticism, a strand of spirituality common to most religious practice, often echoed in art and music. We are in the territory of metaphor, as the Gospel writers sought to make sense of the deepest truths they had discerned about Jesus, expressing them in a way that spoke most powerfully to their first hearers.

Luke's hearers had consistently heard Jesus portrayed as a prophet, one who had both followed and exceeded the examples of the greatest prophets of the tradition, Moses and Elijah. The parallels with Moses and Elijah are made explicit in the story of the Transfiguration, immediately before Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to face his 'exodus' of suffering, death and resurrection. At the end of Luke's Gospel, these events are completed by his being carried up to heaven. For Luke's hearers, there would have been unmistakable parallels again. Moses entered the cloud to be with God. Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind at the end of his earthly ministry (2 Kings 2.1-18), promising to his disciple and successor Elisha that Elisha would receive a measure of his spirit. Jesus promises his disciples his Spirit as he takes his leave of them: his power and presence will

continue on earth when the Spirit comes to empower them to take up his mission.

Those are some of the echoes of the Ascension story which Luke's first hearers would have heard. What are we to make of it, twenty-one centuries later?

Perhaps we may discover in our time the same truths about the human condition which the first disciples also learned. They had to get used to living in a world without Jesus, or at least without the Jesus they had known. In his final weeks, particularly in St John's account, Jesus urges his followers to understand: 'Things are going to be different. You won't see me or hear me in the way you used to. You will experience my presence in a new way.' And in John's Gospel Jesus actually tells them that it is better for them if he goes away. Luke's account tells us it was as he withdrew from them that they are blessed.

In one of her sermons, the American priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes of how her husband, Edward, is a lover of birds, particularly hawks. When they travel together he tends to spot large birds flying high above the road and becomes more interested in working out the species of bird than in what is going on at ground level. Barbara admits that her nerves are often somewhat frayed by the end of such a journey. A few years ago, she and her husband had to be apart for a couple of months and she thought she might get a break from the hawks. Instead, she found she was seeing them everywhere, almost as if for the first time. She began to realise that she wasn't so much seeing them with her own eyes but with her husband's. He wasn't there, so she was seeing them for him. Although he was absent, he felt as present as ever.

There is something of that process going on in the Acts of the Apostles, the second part of Luke's account of the life of Jesus and the transformative effect he had on people. As Jesus takes his leave of his disciples, he tells them: 'You are now my witnesses, my messengers'. Two men then appear and give them a small kick: 'What are you standing around for? You heard what he said. There is work to be done.'

The priest and author Mark Oakley writes of Jesus's parting message to his disciples in these terms: 'Go and see the world through my eyes, love the world with my compassion, stand up for the forgotten with my courage, challenge evil with my anger, make this world through my justice. I'm not going anywhere, ... I'm going *everywhere* – with you, all the way, in you to your deepest self. There will be times when you won't see me, but it's because I must now become the air you breathe, the light you see by. ... It's scary. But as he challenges us to live alone he promises to send some comfort – Spirit, holy, beautiful, just and freeing.' And not just now, but for ever.

The ascended Christ becomes the source of our life, our energy and our trust. The wind beneath our wings. The thing that gets us out of bed in the morning and makes us attempt the impossible, sometimes even achieving it. The love that lies at the heart of all things, believing all things, enduring all things, the only strength, the only meaning.

That's the process that begins at the Ascension - at least from our end, as his followers. Do we ever wonder what it was like for Jesus? The late poet laureate Cecil Day-Lewis wrote a poem about what it felt like leaving his five year old son at school to play his first game of football. It's called *Walking Away*:

'... I can see  
You walking away from me towards the school  
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free  
Into a wilderness, the gait of one  
Who finds no path where the path should be.

That hesitant figure, eddying away  
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,  
Has something I never quite grasp to convey  
About nature's give-and-take – the small, the scorching  
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so  
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly  
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –  
How selfhood begins with a walking away,  
And love is proved in the letting go.'

'While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.'

Amen.