

## St Mary Abbots

Sunday after Ascension

Ezekiel 36:24-28, Acts 16:16-34, John 17:20-end

Father Christopher

For those of you who were not able to be here for Ascension Day on Thursday, that is the day on which we celebrate Christ's ascending to heaven after the 40 days of His appearances to the disciples which followed his resurrection, and which we have been hearing about in our readings over the weeks since.

As Mother Emma preached then, it can be hard to make sense of with our post-Enlightenment, post-Copernicus, and indeed post-Stephen Hawking, view of the world and of the universe. We now know what is up there beyond the clouds, because most of us have been there, even just flying away on the holidays we have been waiting so long for.

Neil Armstrong did not rise above our atmosphere to find God seated on His throne with Jesus at His right hand. No, he, and others, found the seemingly limitless space of the universe, along with the moon and the other planets, beyond which lie the other stars of our galaxy. And so, the traditional depiction of Jesus's feet sticking out from under the clouds as He disappears from view appear not just comic, as though He is somehow stuck dangling there, but to many they also show up Christianity as something of a fairy tale.

In our confirmation classes we have been grappling at times with which elements of our faith we believe in literally and which seem perhaps more metaphorical or symbolic. And in case you think I am going to give you all the answers this morning, well, most of us spend our whole lives grappling with these questions, and there are no easy answers. But if the literal ascension of Jesus into the sky might seem one of those aspects of our faith which is harder for us to credit, we can at least see its wider significance for us.

From being a small movement in Palestine around the person of Jesus, His ascension really made possible the growth of Christianity as something of worldwide significance. If following Jesus meant encountering His physical person, it would necessarily be limited to those few. It was only, somewhat ironically, with His departing the scene that His message, and His life, death and resurrection, could reach the whole world, rather than just that part of it: it marked the culmination of His saving action, before the Holy Spirit came on His followers at Pentecost, and marked the beginning of the Church, as we shall celebrate next week. But the Ascension also marks something else. In the birth of Jesus, God became man; and Jesus is therefore both human and divine.

In His Ascension, on one level the Second Person of the Trinity is returning to His home with the Father in heaven. But as Jesus is fully human as well as divine, that means that He is taking our *humanity* back up to heaven with Him too. And, if that sounds a bit too theological to you for this time in the morning, it means that this whole Jesus business is not just about God coming closer to us. We are also drawing – and are drawn – closer to Him. This is no one way street. We are changed, made closer to God through the person of Jesus.

How are we changed? Well, Jesus prays, in the gospel we heard, from just before His passion, *'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'* He prays *'on behalf of those who will believe in me through [the disciples'] word'* - that's us - that we may all be one. *'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.'*

Just as Jesus takes our humanity up into heaven, and draws us closer to God, so we will also be closer to one another. And indeed, we can't simply have love for Him without also having love for one another. But what does this closeness to God, for all this theology, look like?

We get a number of strong hints in our reading from Ezekiel, as God tells His people that He will bring them into their own land. 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' 'You shall be my people, and I will be your God.' In our reading from Acts there are a number of healings, of different kinds, which give us something of a clue I think. There is the healing of a slave-girl who is irritating Paul by crying out 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' There's an obvious irony here: she irritates Paul by following him and crying out the truth about him. But rather than ticking himself off for being an impatient pastor, he is able to heal her of her spirit of divination. But the most important healing in this is that she is healed of being exploited by the people who owned her, and would make money by her fortune-telling.

For their pains Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten and imprisoned; whereupon, in the middle of the night, an earthquake shakes the prison, and they are all freed; their chains fall off. This is not however the climax of the story, because the greatest healing is perhaps that of the jailor. He had been about to kill himself, and instead asks what he must do to be saved.

He then washes Paul and Silas's wounds, and is baptised by them; after which he sets food before Paul and Silas. He serves and is served.

There are a lot of people needing release from their captivity here. Paul and Silas are the most obvious; but only after they have freed the slave-girl from her exploitation. And before the jailor is saved from humiliation and baptised. All also have their wounds that need washing. The jailor washes Paul and Silas, before he in turn is washed in baptism. They wash, tend and feed each other. The wolf lying down with the lamb, as it were. And this is really the kind of vision of humanity that is enabled by Jesus taking on our humanity and taking it up into heaven with Him.

We are used to a world in which we are expected to look out for ourselves; and to do so is thought to be in everyone's interests for the sake of economic flourishing. But if we are indeed as close to Jesus as He is to the Father, we will also be so close to each other that we cannot but serve each other as Paul, Silas and their jailor do, for we are united in the bond of the same love, that unites what is above with those of us who dwell in this all-too imperfect world.

All of us need healing of one kind or another, deep within our bones. All of us need salvation.

We will not find it alone however; but only through being open to being tended by others and tending them in turn. And, wherever we think it might be, by setting our eyes on the things that are above, as we are raised with Christ to heaven. And as we await Pentecost, we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to live His risen life in our world. Amen