



Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 5 May 2016

Yesterday, it being the first Wednesday of the month, I – wearing my other hat – did two services in two nursing homes, in the parish where I spend half my time. And, it being the eve of the Ascension, I thought we could celebrate Ascension together in those services.

It did not go well! Most of them had no idea what Ascension was about. A fair number of them had never heard of it. And when I asked if there were any hymns they would like – a question that gets a lot of response, and sometimes leads to arguments, at Christmas, or Easter, or Harvest – they just looked at me blankly.

And I suspect they're not alone. Ascension isn't a festival we tend to make very much of. Special services, yes – exciting traditions, special foods, Ascension decorations – not really. And even hymns – I don't blame my friends in the nursing homes for being a bit stuck. There are a few Ascension hymns – but not lots.

So why is it that Ascension is something we skate over? Something we don't understand? Something we often, perhaps, if we're really honest – don't particularly care about?

I think part of it is that Ascension seems to reflect a very pre-modern way of understanding the world. The Gospel and Acts accounts of Jesus' ascension – of Jesus physically being taken upwards – seem to say that God lives, physically, in the sky – something that our first hymn this evening said quite explicitly, Jesus returning to his native skies! And whatever they may have thought in the first century – however much sense this made to them then – we now know that isn't true. It was Khrushchev, apparently, talking about Yuri Gagarin's space flight, who said "well, he didn't see God when he was up there" – and for him (although not, apparently, for Gagarin) – that was enough to close down a conversation about the existence of God.

So there is that. The idea of Ascension – the accounts of Ascension that we've heard this evening – don't mean as much to us as they did when they were first written. They can even sound ridiculous.

And perhaps another part of it is that Ascension is about absence. Ascension is when we think about Jesus, no longer with his disciples as he was. And that's painful. Throughout the Easter season we've been invited to identify with the disciples, imagining ourselves with Mary in the garden on Easter morning, with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the locked room with Thomas and the Twelve – and if we identify with the disciples, this is a painful story to hear. We might not feel that it's anything to celebrate. Ascension is the day when Jesus' life with the disciples stops.

Both of those are real problems – but both of them point to something else. Both point to a solution – a way of rethinking the problem that tells us something important about Ascension, and, by extension, about Jesus. About God. And about ourselves. Ascension – like all the really important things about God and about our faith – is a mystery, a paradox: something we can't quite grasp, something that is beyond human understanding – but something that's important. Something we crave.

So no, that physical and concrete understanding that Jesus was physically lifted up to heaven, a real place in the sky – that doesn't work. But, paradoxically, what Ascension does tell us is that the physical is important. Jesus' human body doesn't stop mattering. Jesus, having become human in the Incarnation, remains human – it's the human Jesus who is now in heaven (wherever heaven may be) and with God. Our first hymn does say something important in the third verse. Jesus **loves** the earth he leaves – that pain of absence is not just about the disciples, it's pain that Jesus feels too. And Jesus, risen, ascended and glorified (in the words of another hymn!) still calls humankind his own.

In fact, he doesn't just **call** humankind his own – humankind **is** his own. Humanity is still part of Jesus at the Ascension – humanity is still part of Jesus now. Humanity is held in the heart of the Trinity: all that we do and fail to do, all our potential and all our fallenness, all the things we rejoice in and all the pain we carry – held in God.

So perhaps the absence of Jesus, our second problem with Ascension, is a price worth paying for the presence of Jesus with God.

And yet that, too, is a paradox.

The absence of Jesus' physical presence, walking and talking and cooking breakfast with his disciples – yes, that's gone. We can't argue with that. But that's not all there is to Jesus – it's not all there is to God.

Because Ascension isn't the end of the Easter season. Easter doesn't end until Pentecost. Ascension is a gear-change: into the days of waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples waited, not as they had waited on Holy Saturday, in despair and darkness – they waited in hope. They didn't know exactly what was going to happen, but they knew it would be worth the wait.

And what happened was Pentecost: the Holy Spirit. Not Jesus back again; something new. But something in continuity with Jesus. The Holy Spirit is God with us – just as Jesus was God with us – but differently. The Holy Spirit is God with us, empowering us to be God with and for one another.

The time of waiting and hoping between Ascension and Pentecost is also a time of praying: for the disciples, and in the Catholic and many other traditions. We have the Holy Spirit already; but it's still right that we should pray that we would be empowered by the Spirit. That we should be open to the work of the Spirit. That the light of the Spirit would dawn in the world.

This year, the Archbishops of York and Canterbury have encouraged all churches and all Christians to keep these as special days of prayer. We can sometimes forget how much we need the Spirit;