

## Ascension 2020

This really is the strangest of times.

I mean of course Ascension Day. What could be stranger than that?

But then our whole lives are pretty strange at the moment.

So it's worth thinking for a moment about whether these two experiences of strangeness have anything in common, anything to say to each other.

Most particularly, I wonder whether the Ascension of Jesus can help us make some sense of the crisis the world is going through.

We can think about the Ascension in two ways: the disciples bidding their sad farewell to Jesus or his joyful return to heaven. Well, of course it's not "or" but "and" because the ascension is both of those things.

As I said at the beginning of this celebration, the Ascension is about this world in all its joys and sorrows being united with heaven. At the end of St Matthew's gospel, as Jesus says goodbye to his disciples, he says "*Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age*". (Mt. 28.20b)

I think that this year more than ever, the Ascension of Jesus speaks directly to the situation we and indeed the whole world find ourselves in.

This year there have been many sad goodbyes - and there will probably be many more. There have been the goodbyes of death of course, but also the goodbyes as loved ones have been taken into hospital with their loved ones not knowing whether they would see them again. And there is also the goodbye we are all having to wave to of familiar ways of life. No one knows what the "new normal" will be like, but it's pretty certain that it won't be back to business as usual. Patterns of work, of travel, of socialising and sport. Everything will be different, both for better and worse.

The Ascension of Jesus assures us that all this, the past, the present and the future, are safe in God's hands and that Jesus shares all that we are going through - not as a remote mythological figure but as the living Lord.

People have often commented on how the present crisis is bringing the best out of people. Of course, there are the many inspiring stories of heroic service by those caring for victims of Covid-19. But it's strange, isn't it, how isolation is

making people more aware of each other. It's as if the pandemic is bringing to light something which has always been true but which we often ignore in our self-preoccupied bubbles. The expression "we are all in it together" may be over used and sometimes abused, but it's true. And because the crucified Jesus is risen, ascended and glorified, our togetherness is not a huddling together out of a common fear but a profound expression of the truth about human existence.

It is now that the promise of Jesus is most reassuring: *I am with you always to the end of the age.*

Here we have a choice. Will we reject the promise of Jesus as pious nonsense or will we accept it as true? We are not being invited to accept any particular political programme based on whatever conflicting scientific evidence is alleged, but simply to trust that beyond every political programme lies a reality that lasts for ever, the ultimate and loving supremacy of God.