

What is there to show for the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven? And what is promised to us because of Christ's Ascension? On the Mount of Olives is a small domed building – now a mosque, built around what are said to be the footprints Jesus left when he went up into heaven. So that's left, I suppose – and that event is depicted in all sorts of ways in art, glass and stone in our churches, not least in York Minster, on one of the bosses in the nave. As you look up all you can see is a pair of feet. But, when you think about it, the Ascension is about a disappearance. The writings of Luke, who is the only one to record the event, speak of Jesus being taken from the disciples, of him withdrawing from them, of a cloud coming between them and him. At the end of all this there is nothing left, nothing to show for it.

What interests me is the reaction of the disciples to all this. For forty days they have had the promise of the presence of Christ, in his risen form. They have spoken with him, eaten with him, been challenged and enthused by him. The event on the Mount of Olives leaves them in no doubt that this is not one of his amazing disappearances and appearances. This is final. They are clear that he has gone to be with his Father, as he said he would to Mary Magdalene on the day of his resurrection. For them this is symbolised by the direction of his leaving them – up rather than down – and by the cloud, a sign of the presence of God. He has gone not to come back.

So why, in Luke's telling, do they return to Jerusalem with joy? Why do they worship? Why are they not even more bereft than after Jesus's death? He has now left them for good. I think it is because they know what is in store for them. Jesus has spent his time with them promising that his resurrection is for ever, that it is eternal and universal, that it cannot be undone. He has promised them that the power at work in him, and only fleetingly and unpredictably available to humanity before Christ came – the Holy Spirit – will be released to everybody who opens themselves to Christ by faith. Wait, he says, and you will receive. And his words before his death become a little more accessible. After I am gone I will send the Holy Spirit, to be alongside you just like I was, and to be in you, for ever.

What there is to show for the Ascension is not some kind of holy 'blue plaque' commemorating an event long in the past, even if the footprints at the Mount of Olives are rather holy in their way. What there is to show is you and me, is this place, is God's church, is God at work in open and hidden ways in the world all around us. The Ascension does not mark the abdication of God from human life, the end of Christ giving it his best shot and going home to Dad. The Ascension marks the next stage in God's dwelling with humanity and humanity's dwelling with God – of God in us and us in God. Christ, confined to one place in his life on earth after the resurrection, is now unlimited, present everywhere, for all of us.

What is promised to us then, by the Ascension? Not only the presence of Christ in us, by the Spirit he promised, but also our presence with God, at his right hand, in Christ Jesus. Christ has gone to be with his father in the body of our resurrected humanity, carrying the wounds of his death and passion. Christ has not left us. He has taken us with him to the presence of God: we are at home, and await the time when that is fully revealed. In the words of Colossians, our life is safely secured in Christ – 'hidden' in him. We are where he is.

And, the Bible says, his journey home involved an encompassing of everything about human life, the life of this world. There was down as well as up, and, following the hint about Christ 'descending' as well as 'ascending', the doctrine grew that in his death Christ sorted out the eternal side of evil in the 'harrowing of hell'. It is easy to get carried away and quite graphic with this: it seems important though to say that in the ascension there is no aspect of the world's life which is left out. Christ does not sidestep the mess: he transcends it by enveloping it. All of us is there, made completely new.

I was thinking of this doctrine, our presence in heaven already because Christ is there, when I heard of a speech that President Nixon never gave in 1969, during the moon landings. He'd had a speech prepared in the event that the mission failed, and the astronauts were left stranded on the moon. At the end of the speech he would have said this:

In ancient days, men looked at stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood.

Others will follow, and surely find their way home. Man's search will not be denied. But these men were the first, and they will remain the foremost in our hearts.

For every human being who looks up at the moon in the nights to come will know that there is some corner of another world that is forever mankind.

There is a corner of heaven that is forever humanity, redeemed, restored, forgiven, healed and born anew in Christ. What is there to show for the Ascension? The earthly body of Christ: the church awaiting the revelation of glory and glimpsing heaven on earth. And the resurrection body of Christ at God's right hand, and of us with him, in his redeemed humanity. May we on earth be a people, a church, a body expectant that the fullness of all this will be revealed, and here and now worshipping the risen and glorified Lord, now, and until the Kingdom comes. Amen.