

On Thursday we marked the Ascension, the 'coronation' of Christ. It's always on a Thursday, because it's 40 days after Easter, 10 days before Pentecost. What is there to show for the Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven? There are windows of it, like one in our North Quire aisle, near the Percy Tomb. At Walsingham, in Norfolk there's a chapel with some feet sticking out of the ceiling. In York Minster there's a roof boss with similar feet and lots of bemused faces. But this is fanciful. 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. Think of a time when you said a final goodbye to someone. It's like that, times 100.

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 therefore some kind of holy 'blue plaque' commemorating an event long in the past, even if those feet pictures are quite fun to look at. 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. And he promises his immediate followers that the power which was at work in him would be there's in unlimited form. And, miraculously, they understand what he means and they do what he says. They realise that they are part of this great story, and they make themselves ready. The twelve, the inner core, have become eleven, so, in order to be as ready as they can be for what Jesus wants from them, they make up the number of the twelve again, and Matthias is set apart. It's interesting to see what he is chosen to be: a 'witness to [the] resurrection'.

That's the key word. Witness. As Christ ascends, so they realise that this is not the end but the beginning, the start of witness of the church in the power of the risen Christ. They don't need a new committee member for the Jesus Christ Museum Trust. They need a pointer to the risen Christ, a container of the power of God, a voice for the father's love. They need a messenger not a curator, because the Ascension unlocks the church's life. The risen Christ, with whom they'd been barbequing fish a few days before, was alive and with the Father, praying for them still. So there was work to do, not memories to chew over.

Christ has gone home. But he returns to the presence of his father changed, as we all are after a time away. As the Bishop of Stafford said at our clergy conference a while ago, we never go 'back' home. We go 'forward' home. He goes 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. Jesus may have gone, but he's not dead and gone. He's alive and urging us on.

What is there to show for the Ascension? In Acts Chapter 1, a group of people who just know something amazing is going to happen. Come back next week for the next thrilling instalment and to hear about the flamethrower of the Spirit of God. What is there to show today for the Ascension? Us! The Body of Christ: his Church, flawed but full of reflected glory. No wonder Jesus prayed for our unity in John 17. The people of God – not just the church. The work of God, seen heroically at all times and everywhere. And 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.

If you want a testimony to the Ascension, look around. We are all Matthiases, called to witness that Jesus is alive and that God heals and forgives and makes us new. I gather that, near Jerusalem, there is a piece of rock with two footprints, left, we are told, by the ascending Christ. In a fortnight's time I might see them. But I don't need to, because the footprints of the ascended Christ are here, and everywhere God's people meet. Praise God, who gives us power, and calls us to witness, and to praise, now, and until the Kingdom comes. Amen.