

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

High Mass on the Ascension Day

The Revd Mae Christie, Priest-in-Charge of All Saints', Tooting

Thursday 10th May 2018 at 1.05pm

While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?'

I'm the very new (6 months!) priest in charge at all Saints Tooting – as you can probably tell by my accent, I'm very much a south Londoner- but they let us over the river from time to time to speak a bit about the good news, so here I am.

As I was preparing for our celebration of Ascension, I thought back to some years ago when I was a teenage acolyte at Trinity Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Ok, it was many years ago. It was a balmy Thursday night in the deep south, and as my family lived very near the church and I was such a keen acolyte, I was voluntold by my father (another esteemed George) that I would be serving at the Ascension service at our church because no one else could make it.

Timing and tradition as it is, Ascension was not one of the better-attended services at our church and the acolyte rota had fallen down a bit. That year, we would be joined by another church and their choir – so we had two choirs- (blessedly!). Lots of priests & various folks were swanning around in their cassocks, but not a huge congregation present. I remember this well because as I was the only acolyte, I had to do both the first and second server duties. The first server helped set up the altar and the second did, as we said, 'plates and gates'.

I was all geared up – I knew my stuff – but several things went terribly wrong. The candles didn't stay lit (needed more lighter fluid said the sweet altar guild member) and, having fastidiously locked the gates per instruction before the Eucharistic prayer, after communion, I found to my horror that the gates were refusing to unlock. It's very hard to try to wrench communion rail gates apart liturgically in a graceful way, but luckily our beloved rector rescued me before all the clergy had to shimmy over them one by one. After the service, I remembered being exasperated at how much effort we had put in for a service that was not well attended.

But part of the problem then, and now, is that we don't know how to talk about the Ascension. We don't know how to wrap our heads around the doctrine of our Lord being drawn into heaven. It is as if Christianity has decided to pick our battles with difficult doctrine – it's hard enough coping with the virgin birth, miracles and resurrection. We almost then seem to skip to Pentecost because perhaps for some, it is the part that feels as if it is 'about us.' But that jump from Resurrection to Pentecost is completely lost without the Ascension. Jesus did not simply fade into the background.

There are extraordinary depictions of Jesus' Ascension in Christian Art – and one of my favourites is a piece by Martin Schongauer in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France.



Jesus's body and face are not visible in the painting – it just features his feet, dangling from the bottom of very full cloud, with his followers looking up, in various stages of devotion and shock. This type of artwork can be considered over literal in our modern times, but it holds a very important truth about our common faith and the doctrine around Ascension:

We really do proclaim in our creeds that he, with followers watching, ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. And, in doing so, he further transforms and transfigures our common life. The moment was so extraordinary that we read this line in Luke, which I love – While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

We get a slightly less embarrassing version, lacking the questioning of these angels in the retelling in Acts. But the sentiment is there – 'what are you still looking up there for? Look around you and set out to do the work given to you by God.' And we find out in Acts that the followers of Jesus did just that. The people with him on the day of his Ascension watched with awe at him going up, and then they followed his example. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

They didn't follow his example just because that is a nice thing to do – a good testament to their beloved. They went out, in great joy, proclaiming the good news and were then in the temple blessing God because their hearts were stirred as they expectantly waited on God to continue to work in their lives. They were being transformed and transfigured into the likeness of God. And Jesus's ascension was not some party trick: an exciting way to take his place at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus's ascension, as with all of his life, marked a change in our reality, not just for the people of his own time on earth, but for all of us. When he ascended, he brought heaven and earth together in a new way. He redeemed and connected us.

The things of earth, us and all of creation, were transformed, and the more we wait on him in our lives, both in his coming again and in his daily offering to us, the more we are transformed. And

this time between ascension and Pentecost is the perfect opportunity to pray for transformation in our own lives and communities.

For Christians, as we look up to God, we are always then encouraged (like the Apostles and followers of Jesus at the ascension) to look out, to cast our gaze to our neighbour and reach out our hand in blessing and service. To love God fully and to be fully transformed is to seek to share the blessing of transformation and love in the world around us.

So as we continue our celebration of Easter and now Ascension through to the joy of Pentecost next Sunday, let us pray that as God transforms us more into the likeness of Christ and our hearts ascend in joy, we might be compelled to reach out in blessing and service, now and always.

While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Amen.