

Ascension Day Homily 2020



There are times we need to celebrate. One of the things that the Lockdown has done, is to deprive us of that. Some things can be postponed, open top bus rides through the city if your team have won the league for example. But for others, like those ending Secondary School or University, getting your results or degree is obviously the main thing you are there for, but what we want to do is celebrate, the Grad Ball or the School Prom. It is not the end of the world, not to be able to hold them, but psychologically it is a big loss. It is that moment we come together with all those we have spent years with, and possibly for some, we will not see them again for some time or ever. It is a rite of passage. (I remember my University career ended in 1977, a hot summer, not as hot as 76, it was the Queen's Silver Jubilee and pubs in Lancaster were selling beer at 1952 prices, and discos, I do mean discos, Saturday Night Fever came out that year, who can doubt the 70s had the best music?, ended with Brown Sugar.)

Now the Ascension, moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, is the end of Jesus' time on earth. It appears at the end of Luke's gospel and at the beginning of his next book, The Acts of the Apostles. It is the hinge between the two books. As the gospel comes to an end, and Jesus rises to heaven, the Apostles rush down to the Temple to celebrate. For them the Temple is where traditionally God lives on earth, it is where the story of Luke's Gospel began with Zechariah worshipping, it is the place where the apostles feel closest to Jesus at that moment. Where he made some of his most dramatic announcements. And so they rush down there to celebrate.

But what? As yet they do not have the full picture; that will come with Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. But from the words of the angel they know that he will return. Not only that, but they have seen so much, experienced so much in the last days since the Resurrection, that they know there is more to come.

In returning to heaven Jesus completes his mission which began with his birth back in Chapter 2 of the gospel.

But for the Apostles the future is full of expectation.

When we move on. When one stage of our lives comes to an end, we look forward to the future with a mixture of feelings. When this end is positive (and there can be sad breaks in our life), we are full of an array of emotions. Hope, and excitement of what is to come, stepping out to use our gifts, but also some nervousness as we step away from the certainties we have grown used to, the way of life, the home or institution that has given us a secure base (hopefully), and into the unknown in a variety of ways, (and as an ex-University Chaplain, when a child leaves, can I beg parents not to take over the departing child's room at home, or thinking about separating, just as they are leaving, because this can be a time they need some security in their lives, to have a home, or at least, if you are thinking of doing something new, to discuss it with them before you do.)

The Apostles are at a break, and they celebrate, but they are nervous too. How will they be up to the next stage?. They are losing Jesus, but they know there is more to come. They have been given a mission as we see in the Gospel. They have been given authority, they are to baptise, but most essentially they are to 'make new disciples.' What they have received they have to share. To do this they have to go out. They have to step away from those certainties they have come to rely on, they have to 'put out into the deep' as Luke says in Chapter 5, in order to reach out to others in the name of Jesus.

This cannot be done without the Holy Spirit, whose arrival we celebrate in 10 days, but to make this happen, to empower the disciples, to propel them into the world, Jesus has to leave them first.

When you think about it, it is an amazing thing that the Church begins with just these few fairly uneducated people. But it should remind us, when we doubt our ability to share what we have been given, to ‘make disciples,’ because we are the descendants in faith of these few, we should remember we too are empowered by our baptism, and that Jesus does not rely on numbers. It is not a question of ‘bums on seats’ as we sometimes say when we want to fill a church, it is simply about making Jesus present in this world in such a way that people are able to welcome him into their lives, and share what we have been given. And celebration is a big part of this.

And we have a lot to celebrate in having found Jesus ourselves and his message and our salvation, and that should be a thing of joy to us, something worth celebrating, and Mass should be a time of celebration for us, just as the disciples rushed to the Temple to celebrate with the now departed Jesus.

Not necessarily celebrating in quite the same way as a School Prom or Grad Ball, the atmosphere does need to be slightly different, but nevertheless with a sense of joy that we have been called, and in the knowledge that Jesus is indeed always with us till the end of time as we step out in his name.