

ASCENSION DAY

TS Eliot reminds us in Little Gidding that 'to make an ending is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.'

Today we heard St Luke's version of the Ascension of Jesus from the Acts of the Apostles, but he also gave us a shorter version at the end of his gospel. The Ascension is an ending to Jesus' presence on earth, both pre-crucifixion and post resurrection.

When an ending involves a departure it can be sad, whether that is a parting at an airport, or at a funeral. In his gospel, St Luke tells us that Jesus led his disciples from Jerusalem to Bethany. During his blessing of them he was carried up into heaven, no doubt covered in the cloud of God's glory.

The disciples worshipped him, but Luke says they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Unless you are glad to get rid of someone, you are not usually full of joy if you know you will not see that person again anytime soon.

So why were the disciples full of joy? Jesus had left them and given them a mission that must have seemed impossible, namely, to go into the world to baptise more disciples and grow God's new community.

This joy only makes sense if the disciples knew that Jesus hadn't disappeared into some secret cosmic hideaway. It only makes sense if the disciples became aware of a new kind of closeness between themselves and Jesus.

Jesus had promised them that they would be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and they would be his witnesses, his agents in his mission, here on earth.

When Jesus is enveloped by the cloud of God's glory and disappears from sight, he enters into communion with the Father which is described as being on his right hand. So Ascension is an ending, a going away. But it is also a beginning because it is a 'coming' in an even closer way. We are not to cling to the earthly understanding of Jesus but the share in the upward movement towards the glory of God.

Because Jesus is with the Father, he is no longer in one particular place in the world, but rather he is available, accessible and approachable for and by all people in every place and situation they may happen to be in.

Jesus is no longer visible. Yet he has not gone away and is closer than ever.

That is why all of us can be joyful. Happy Ascensiontide, and may its ending be a new beginning, for the end is where we start from.

Msgr Harry Entwistle

May 2020