

## 13 May 2021 St Gabriel's Fulbrook

Mass of the Ascension, with Baptism and Confirmation



St Paul wasn't the only one to write a famous letter to the Romans. St Ignatius of Antioch (who as a youth had known St John) wrote to them as well. He was trying to get a message to them before he arrived in Rome under guard destined to be killed. In that letter he wrote these startling words, 'Now that Christ has ascended to the Father, he's *even more visible* to the whole world now than when He lived in obscurity.' (*Romans 3*)

Even *more* visible? How? surely with His ascension Jesus's life on earth has come to a close? Even during the forty mysterious and disorienting days after His resurrection, when as St Luke tells us (Acts 1.3) 'he had continued to appear to [the disciples]', He was *more* visible than *after* the awesome mystery we celebrate today.

It is certainly true that having commissioned His apostles to 'Go to the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation', He who now sits at the right hand of the Father has been *far more widely and deeply* proclaimed and known and followed for two thousand years than He was either before or after His resurrection. Was ever a command so obeyed, in word, in sacrament, in evangelism and service, through the history of the Church?

Our faith seems to depend on Him not being visible. Had Jesus simply remained on earth after rising from the dead, the faith of His followers in every subsequent generation would have still been focused on life in *this* world rather than on the next. The apostles' very last question to Him proves the point: 'Lord, is *now* the time you going to restore Israel's kingdom?' (Acts 1.6). But with Him *gone* from their sight, it became part of the spiritual growth of Christians (you and me, and Victoria and Tilly here) to long and desire to be with Christ whom, here and now, we can only see by faith. No less a person than St Paul said, 'Be intent on things above rather than on things of earth.' (Col 3.2). And of course, in heaven there will *be no faith* because the redeemed will *see God*; even better there will *be no hope*, because they will *possess* what they hope for. There will only be love, because God will be all in all (*1 Cor 15.28*).

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So then, how can we understand Ignatius's words, 'even more *visible*'?

Let me suggest what I think he meant. Remember he was a man under arrest, being transported across modern day Turkey and Greece, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, and he

was writing to the Roman Christians to say, ‘when I arrive *please don’t stop* my martyrdom’. ‘Only pray for me’, he wrote, ‘that I’ll not only be *called* a Christian but really be found to *be* one, so that when I’m gone my witness will live on’. A great and courageous saint.

But in the case of Jesus it is not simply that a witness living on, a memory of a person of great integrity. When Jesus seems to go from us, it is because He goes deeper in God: into what we call heaven, and what Jesus himself called the ‘bosom of the Father’ (Jn 1.18). He took human existence into God's heart. The Ascension means Jesus belongs *entirely* to God. And being thus with the Father, who embraces and sustains the entire universe, Christ is for ever *inseparable* from each one of us. Each one of us can share the intimacy of which Jesus spoke when He said, ‘[The Father and I] will come to him and make our home in him.’ (Jn 14.23)

Of course, we can draw away from him. We can live with our backs turned on him. But He always abides, and waits for us; He is always close to us. By His Holy Spirit He is always drawing the Church—and the world—deeper into the truth about our Blessed Lord Jesus.

You remember that increasingly at the end of His life, Jesus taught and prayed, and in supremely the Eucharist showed, how He would *not* simply be a memory, but would be a *present, living and growing* person within His disciples. That is the meaning of the parable of the true vine which Jesus told at the Last Supper: ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.’ And with shocking clarity He had said of the Eucharist, ‘Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on *me*, will live because of *me*.’ (Jn 6.56-7)

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People who listen to sermons often want, quite right too, to have the connection made for them between the scriptures and their everyday life, they want the scriptures made relevant for current events. Well, dear friends, [dear Victoria and Tilly,] nothing could possibly be *more relevant* than this, nothing could affect your every day life more than this: that God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—lives in the members of Christ’s Body His Church, and makes himself visible in them. His Spirit is poured into us, lives within us, reminds us of Christ’s teaching, so that our minds and bodies may reveal God in all our words and actions and sacrifices. Christ is not distant from you: out of our hearing and out of our sight. He gives himself constantly and visibly in the scriptures, and His Body and Blood, in our fellowship, and in the poor. As St Ignatius said ‘Now that Christ has ascended to the Father he’s *even more visible* to the whole world now than when He lived in obscurity.’ (*Romans 3*)

The puzzle of Ascension is *not* whether all this is true! The puzzle is *why* we are not more simple and willing, to let it *happen* in us. What are we so scared of?

In these days before Pentecost, let us seek the advice and help of someone who knows about openness to God’s presence and growth in us: the Virgin Mary ... so that Christ’s Ascension *into God* may be the moment of His Annunciation *into us*, and that, like her, the whole Church may make Christ *even more visible* to the whole world now than when He lived in obscurity!