

## The Feast of the Ascension 2020

The Gospel tells us, *“The eleven disciples set out for Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had arranged to meet them.”* If it were possible for us to stand on that mountain today and look down through the last two thousand years what would we see? There, gathered before us would be the great saints - we would see saints such as St Augustine, St Catherine of Siena, St Ignatius of Loyola, Mother Teresa, St John Paul, and a host of others. We would see too, generations of ordinary men and women, who lived their Christian faith with commitment and generosity, striving to make this world a better place - just as you and I continue to strive to do today. One face that emerges from all the others is that of the saint known as "Il Poverello". We could loosely translate that as "The wee poor man"! You know who it is - St Francis of Assisi. Francis wrote that hymn with which we are all so familiar, "Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring your love." These words sum up the mission Jesus entrusted to his followers as he ascended into heaven.

Just three years earlier, practically no one had heard of Jesus. Yet, within less than twenty years his followers had spread across the Middle East, into Europe as far as Rome itself. As the number increased of those who recognised Jesus as the one to whom *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given”*, so did the hostility. Soon the Emperor Nero, he who claimed to be a god, began his persecution; Peter, then Paul, together with many others, went to their deaths holding the words of Jesus in their hearts, *“Know that I am with you always.”*

For those first disciples there was no time to stand around *“looking into the sky”*; the Spirit of the Risen Lord urged them on, *“Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations”*; witness to me *“to the ends of the earth”*. This missionary impulse has persevered right down to our own time, in spite of setbacks caused by the infidelity and frailty of some, and in spite too of the hostile, even violent, opposition of the world. Today, the missionary baton is entrusted to you and me.

This missionary impulse is inspired by the desire to make a reality of those words which we recite day-after-day in the Lord's Prayer, *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”*. Doing the will of God is not just about keeping commandments; it is much more significant than that; it is the allowing of heaven to spill into to our world by offering ourselves as the

channels through which God's love pours into the world.

I like that phrase, “allowing heaven to spill into our world”. Often the manner in which we speak of heaven and earth can be very confusing. We can give the impression of heaven as being “up there”, far away, out there somewhere on the edge of the cosmos. But there is only one world, God's world, a world with two aspects, with two interlocking dimensions - heaven and earth.

However, as we know this oneness of heaven and earth has been disrupted by humanity's sin - the tragic consequences of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. But God's loving plan is to reunite heaven and earth, to heal the fracture and to bring about a whole new world, united and transformed. This was the astonishing and world-shattering renewal that began with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; here is the spark that set off the revolution of love, here is the source of the love-energy that God desires to pour through us and so flood the world.

The Feast of the Ascension helps us to understand this extraordinary interlocking relationship between heaven and earth. The Scripture tells us that, “*(Jesus) was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight.*” We must interpret these words with the mind of the evangelist. “*Lifted up*” doesn't mean that Jesus ascended to somewhere “up there”; rather, he enters into another dimension, God's dimension, heaven. The “*cloud*” that takes him from their sight is the symbol of that heavenly reality into which Jesus now enters. Although beyond sight of human eye and touch of hand, Jesus, nevertheless, remains ever present - “he ascended from his disciples without departing from them.” (*Pope St Leo*)

Let us return to the words of the Lord's Prayer, “*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*”. God's will is done through you and me when we are energized by heavenly life. And that heavenly life, that love-energy, comes to us, as it did to the Apostles, principally, through prayer and worship. The Mass, the importance of which we have discovered anew, and in which we long to participate once more, constantly reminds us that in the worship of God we are joined with heaven's company. Have you noticed how often the angels and saints are mentioned; for example, “And so, in the company of the Angels and Saints, we sing the hymn of your praise, as without end we acclaim: “*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts*”.

But the climax of this interconnection of heaven and earth comes when, together, we are united with the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion - the moment when heaven spills into our lives and our world.. How great, at this time, is our yearning for that communion with Our Lord! These weeks and months, because of coronavirus, are a great Eucharistic fast, yet, in a very real way we are living the Eucharist, because what we endure at this time, we endure out of love for one another - we are keeping one another safe. In this way, we ordinary, frequently muddled, often frail, human beings, find our lives engaged in Christ's revolution of love. This is the heavenly love-energy with which we are charged to "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord."

*"Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;*