

## ASCENSION DAY ST MARTIN IN THE FIELDS 5<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2016

The storm clouds were gathering as I climbed the steps into the aircraft. Dressed casually I'd been hoping to rest on the short flight. I love gazing down from the skies at the earth below, peering through the clouds at the contours of land and sea. But soon we flew into a thunderstorm. The flight attendants stayed strapped into their seats. Buffeted about the clouds none of the passengers was talking. You could almost see bubbles above our heads filled with prayers, 'O God, help us land safely!'

Well, we survived, and as we came into land the man next to me began talking, 'You know, I knew it was going to be a turbulent flight. In fact I knew it was going to be really bad but I didn't tell you because I didn't want to frighten you.'

'Oh, thank you.' I said.

'Actually,' he went on, 'I'm an airline pilot. What do you do?'

'Oh,' I replied, 'I'm a priest – but I didn't tell you because I didn't want to frighten you!'

It's only human to say a prayer when we're in difficulty. But when events of life and death overwhelm us and we're plunged into emotional turbulence even words themselves seem unable to bear the burden of our dreads and dreams.

The trauma of those first disciples in the aftermath of Christ's crucifixion can't be exaggerated. After a three year roller-coaster of following him, when their understanding of Jesus was constantly stretched and confounded, they saw him crucified, dead and buried. This man of justice nailed by injustice.

Then three days later women from his inner circle confounded the other disciples even more with stories of seeing him alive.

With their own eyes the disciples began to witness these claims for themselves as they came face to face with the scarred yet breathing body of Jesus.

Through all of this they feared for their own lives. Yet the sight of Christ alive beyond his dying gave them courage. Just as the Risen Christ has brought strength to Christians for two millennia. In many parts of the world today where the freedom to speak and to believe is curtailed, in places like China, Pakistan and much of the Middle East, it's Christ's Resurrection that brings hope to those who face equally hostile and crucifying opposition.

Then, it all came to a climax with this final astonishing scene of Jesus ascending into heaven. Jesus, known as the Son of Man and Son of God, child of both earth and heaven, who'd been laid in the heart of the earth was then lifted to the throne of heaven. It's a vision that's inspired artists, poets and musicians for two thousand years.

I love the poem of John Donne which begins,

“Since I am coming to that Holy roome,

Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,

I shall be made thy Musique;”

I find myself quoting this verse more and more as I write letters of condolence to friends who are bereaved. And, I find myself meditating on it often as I think about my own mortal future.

'The Holy Room' speaks of a place of welcome at the end of a long journey.

'The Choir of Saints' imagines being part of a great chorus of voices singing in harmony, a taste of which we're enjoying tonight in Will Todd's Missa Brevis.

And the line, 'I shall be made thy music', vibrates with the faith that, in spite of all my sins and shortcomings, my life, redeemed by the forgiveness of Christ, shall in some mysterious way become music to the ears of God.

Such a hope is rooted in the Ascension of Christ who goes ahead of us from this land of the dying. It points unmistakably to there being another world. And it's Christ who opens the Gate to heaven, to the world of the truly alive.

This vision of a life beyond has, I know, comforted many in their grief. Some of the Hillsborough Families with whom I've journeyed over the years have held on to the hope that their loved ones live on not just in their hearts but in a world beyond where one day they shall all be reunited.

But this story of the Ascension is bi-focal. Yes, it fixed the eyes of the disciples on heaven. But the Angels left them in no doubt that there was work yet to be done on earth.

Christianity isn't an escapist religion. It's not about retreating into a personal spiritual bubble. It's about doing God's will on earth as it's done in heaven. That's the heart of the Lord's Prayer. The earthing of heaven.

When Martin Luther contemplated the end of time he wrote,  
“Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I’d still plant my apple tree.”

It’s like having told a composer that the end of the world is nigh only to find them still labouring lovingly over their composition.

Luther kept an eye on both the future and the present. That’s what this scene on Ascension Day captures.

On the one hand the disciples looking up at Jesus receding beyond the clouds into the dimension of heaven; on the other Jesus looking down on the disciples, pressing them to take his message to the ends of the earth. A faith with two horizons.

In the very last book of the Bible there’s another breath-taking scene. It’s a dramatic picture of heaven descending and God coming down to earth. The Ascension followed by, if I can coin such a word, the Descension. It’s a vision of the fusing of heaven and earth when the two worlds, once separated by sin and evil, finally become one. It’s nothing less than the answer to the Lord’s own Prayer for the earthing of heaven. The mission of Jesus is complete – heaven and earth are at last reconciled. The Kingdom has finally come.

So, whether we’re making music or planting a seed in a window box or standing up for someone who’s been treated unfairly every act of creativity, kindness and justice is a step along the way of bringing heaven down to earth. All is a prelude to the coming of God’s kingdom. An overture to the great Jazz celebration when heaven and earth shall become one and the whole of Creation shall be made His music.

THE END

1080 Words

the Right Reverend James Jones

