

## I Am With You Always

Could it be that the risen Lord is *closer* to us - after the Ascension - than Jesus of Nazareth was to the disciples - before the Crucifixion? This suggestion has been hovering in the Fathers of the Church, as found in the Office of Readings this week; I reckon we should give it some thought.

**Closeness** The first thought we have about the word "closeness" is probably a physical one. We think about the closeness of lovers, of mother and child, of husband and wife. All these are *images* of closeness, dear to painters, sculptors, poets, film-makers and novelists; and they are frequently in our dreams too. But wait a moment! Think of the closeness of people crammed into a lift at the Victoria Centre -especially if one or two of them don't appear to have washed for a while, or are intoxicated. Think of the closeness, to take up our series of images, of human oppressors and their victims: the rapist, the kidnapper, the cruel spouse. The physical closeness may be just as powerful, even more so; but there is room in physical closeness for a spiritual gulf that separates us absolutely from those who are physically closest to us.

### **Aloneness**

Much more familiar to us (thank heavens) is physical closeness which alerts us to our loneliness. There is very little comfort, should you feel lonely, in getting on a British bus, with every traveller desperately seeking to sit alone until forced to share a seat: or even in joining the crowd in a store, though here you can pay someone to talk to you by buying something. I suspect some of the buying-frenzy suffered by the lonely is just about that; *becoming a purchaser* gives us a bit of relationship. No, it really isn't about physical closeness we need to be concerned; and there is something yet more surprising to notice: and that is the way we experience the very thing the Ascension depicts: *the departure of someone we love*.

### **Parting**

Even a very temporary separation will do to think about this. As soon as they've gone, and the silence falls, there is an instant flattening of the spirits. This may even extend to a quite disproportionate sorrow, a sense of being inconsolable. We are experiencing a kind of shudder of death itself. But then something marvellous can happen, as we feel the power of the relationship to cancel the separation, to annul the distance, and to continue to communicate meaning to people who to all physical appearances are widely separated. This can give a powerful sense of joy to the time spent apart. There is joy in remembrance of times past, and in anticipation of meeting again. There are stories to be saved from my experience, there is imagination to be exercised about the one who is away: there is peace and security in the thought of our belonging

### ***Remain in Me, as I remain in the Father***

This illuminates the closeness which is between us and the risen Christ. He did not come to be *physically* present to a few people, but to make the eternal God real to the whole world. His work isn't finished by his returning to the Eleven and a few others, but by the sort of presence by which lovers know and live in their beloved. Even to begin to live in this way is to inherit a home in the heavens, and to be loved by the Father; and the growing peace and joy of realising this are gifts of the Holy Spirit of the promise. We must pass over, and be converted from thinking of this spiritual belonging trivially or negligently, or simply as a temporary help when we are alone, in order to grasp it as the bursting into being of a new life. a new self; the trigger may be a devastating loss, a leaving, most of all a bereavement; the nearer to the Cross, the more likely. The gift on offer is the experience of the Resurrection itself, of the living water springing up to eternal life. Come, Holy Spirit!  
*Fr Philip*