

The Solemnity of the Ascension is an extraordinary one, which gathers together the themes of Easter in an extraordinary way.

In one sense it is the feast of a **departure**; Jesus leaves us and goes to the Father. But if we think back, this was the whole meaning of the Last Supper, which we have already celebrated on Holy Thursday, when he shared our table with us as a mortal man for the last time. Are we repeating something we have already thought about?

What happened at the last Supper was that he took the food we shared with him, and established it in eternity, made it true bread, for us to eat and not die.

So we are revisiting one of the great themes of Easter: that there is a road open for human beings to reach the Father, that our earthly table is enriched with a new sort of sustenance, that within Christ's Church we can offer each other bread from heaven.

What we realised on Easter Night was that this apparent departure was in fact sealing his *closeness* to us. Am I denying that he died? Absolutely not. When another human being dies, we experience severance from them, division, the wrecking of family ties, the raw horror of bereavement. But the dying of Jesus, which he freely accepted, meant that the Son of God - whom God the Father sends to us as the Source of Life - has entered into the grave *with us*. His unique coming to death only makes his belonging to the human family final, complete, irrevocable. He didn't come among us as a heavenly man, not suffering, not weeping, not failing, *and not dying*. He took on himself the whole burden of humanity, even temptation; only he has never travelled into the wilful dead end of sin. Sin is no human place to go; it deforms and damns humanity. To refuse sin is not to lose humanity, but to live life to the full.

So we celebrate today, not his *abandoning* of human ways, as if he had tired of living within the limits of a lesser kind of being. Rather, we celebrate his taking of all that we are - through the same door by which we too will pass in the end - to the glorious kingdom which the Father has given into *his* hands for *us*.

The apostles stand staring into the sky, not knowing how to feel or what to think. They are certainly looking heavenwards, and they are looking for him; but their uncertainty bears witness to the distance they must travel in understanding, rather than to any distance Jesus has travelled away from them. He is certainly not with them as he used to be; and we also must not seek for any continuing presence on those terms. So our presence to each other in the ordinary human way, even when we are most loving, even when we are married, is not going to give us our ultimate meaning or purpose. "Till death do us part" is a phrase for every earthly relationship, and remembering that, we acknowledge that we have to search elsewhere for the true meaning of our life.

The feast today tells us good news; that in this world which so disconcertingly fails us and lets us fall, the Church has a way of keeping faith, of finding hope: the love of Christ for us is not lost or taken away by this voyage to the Father. But we must be prepared, as sharers in such a hope, for travels of our own, as individuals and as a community. We are pilgrims, and heaven is in our hearts; we will accept the transience of our earthly home as nomads accept their tent. As it is pitched each evening, it will be struck in the morning as the sun wakens us, for another day of journey towards our true home. We must give our own life that quality, and it must be legible also in the life of our Church; we are not a community of standing stones, founded on a rock and anchored to earth. We are people who can fly, as the Jews fled from Pharaoh, and as Jesus is raised to the Father.