

**Ascension Day**  
**24/05/20**  
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**Texts:**

**Ephesians 1:15-23**

**Matthew 28.16-20**

Today we celebrate Ascension Day; a fest that was very popular in the early church but that, in our modern world, can be a slightly embarrassing and uncomfortable celebration. Our Bible is written from the point of view of a three-tiered universe, with hell below the earth, and heaven, the place in which God lives, just above the sky. From this perspective, when Jesus returns to be with God, he ascends into heaven by rising into the sky, disappearing from view in a cloud of glory. This is a story that made sense to the people of the ancient world.

It is not, however, a story that can make any literal sense to people who live with a contemporary, scientific understanding of the universe. The American cosmologist and astrophysicist, Carl Sagan, pointed this out when he said that, even if Jesus had literally ascended at the speed of light (299 792 458 m/s) 2,000 years later, he hasn't yet escaped our galaxy. And when he does, he will enter another of the millions and millions of galaxies in the ever-expanding universe that stretches incomprehensibly all around us.

While a scientific worldview can point out to us that the story of the ascension doesn't work at a literal level, that same worldview can potentially rob us of the meaning that is to be found in the story.

So, what truths may we uncover as we celebrate Ascension Day?

The Christian belief in God's incarnation, means that we have faith in a God who entered the world and took on our human nature. We therefore believe that humanity is completely embraced by God, welcomed by God, in an extraordinary way. That means each, and every, one of us in all the complexity of who we each are. Importantly, God's embrace is not just for the parts of ourselves that are good and lovely and publicly acceptable. That would be easy. There would be no need for God to be God in order to embrace the lovely kind, wholesome, delightful bits of humanity. What makes the story of the incarnation so extraordinary and so confronting is its completeness. God becomes fully human; our humanity is embraced in its fullness. There are no parts of ourselves that have to be left behind.

God loves us enough to embrace our broken vulnerable, weak, parts. Our feelings and our struggles, are not necessarily positive or helpful, but they are human and, through Jesus, they have been taken into the heart of God. God takes us seriously, allows us to be real. God wants healing and wholeness for us and takes those suffering parts of ourselves into God's nature in order that we might be transformed.

Even more extraordinarily, God takes into God's-self not just the broken, vulnerable parts of ourselves, but the downright angry, hateful, vindictive, nasty parts of us too. The parts of humanity that cry out *Crucify him, crucify him!* God holds to God's heart the murderous intentions and actions of humanity, the wanton greed and destruction, the abusive, depraved bits.

This is something about God's love for humanity that is at the same time, incredibly hopeful and deeply shocking. God's embrace of humanity is not just for the bits of humanity that we ourselves can imagine being redeemed. God's embrace goes infinitely further than that. God's love doesn't know where to stop. It is bigger and more mind-boggling than our ever-expanding universe.

God becomes fully human and draws into God's infinite love the fullness of humanity, and on Ascension Day, we celebrate that God doesn't just become fully human on earth but that through the resurrected Jesus, God draws humanity into God's-self; lifts humanity into God's glory.

The ascension, the lifting up, of our human nature transforms humanity. All of our humanity ascends with Jesus and is somehow taken into the heart of God; taken into that inexhaustible, immeasurable love. Without the physical presence of Jesus on earth, he promises to his new body on earth, the church, the gift of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit continues to work in and through the human lives that make up the earthly body of Christ, enabling us to see humanity as God sees it, allowing us to be different and to see each other differently too.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians makes the extraordinary claim that we, the church, are, *the fullness of him who fills all in all* (Eph 1:23). We have been offered hope and we are in turn to offer hope. Hope that comes from the lifting up of humanity and its fulfilling through Christ's body.

Sometimes it is tempting to hide from the horrible realities of the world. (It can be quite easy to do in a place like Cheltenham). But that is not what we are called to do as the body of Christ. We are called to engage with the world out of the hope that we have been given. To know that our lives have been lifted up into God. To know that all the horror of the world has been lifted up into God,

and that God's response is love. We are to live in the world as people who actually know that love in our lives, and who seek to share it with others.

Matthew's Gospel gives us some extraordinary encouragement in this task. First of all he tells us that when the disciples met Jesus on the mountain, prior to his ascension, *they worshipped him, but some doubted* (28:17). But Jesus still sent them, just as he sends you and me, complete with all our doubts all our weaknesses, remembering that he is with us always, even to the end of the age.

Ascension Day celebrates the potential that God releases in human lives and hearts, because God's love redeems all of humanity. This is the work to which the church is called. God does not reject any part of humanity; it is all taken into God's-self. Therefore, we are not to reject any part of humanity. That doesn't mean we have to say it is all lovely; it isn't. It means that we are called to believe that through Christ it is all redeemed, transformed, lifted up.

So let us pray with the author of the letter to the Ephesians; *may the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which he has called us, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among us, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Amen.* (Adapted from Eph 1:17-19).