

The Ascension of the Lord 2009 (Year B)

I would like you to imagine, for a moment, that one day you see me walking out of my front door. Now, I wouldn't want to encourage anyone to take too active an interest in the comings and goings of the Presbytery personnel, but on this occasion I will allow you a few moments of idle curiosity: 'I wonder where he is going', you might think to yourself. But the mere fact that you have seen me going out of the door does not, in itself, tell you very much. I might just be popping out for a few moments to fetch something from the car; or I might be setting off on a two week holiday; I might be going to visit a family delirious with joy at the birth of a new child, or I might be going to arrange a funeral; I might be setting off for a long-anticipated day out, or I might be on the way to the dentist. There is an infinite number of possibilities, and while you could pick up some clues from the clothes I am wearing or from the expression on my face, the simple fact of seeing me going out of the door will tell you nothing in answer to the question 'What does this mean, what is going on here?' In the same way, the Ascension of Jesus, the fact that he leaves his friends behind and is taken up to Heaven, in itself tells us nothing at all. This feast is one that we find it quite hard to get a handle on, quite hard to understand, because we look at this event, this parting, and we ask 'what is that all about, why are we celebrating Jesus going away?' The only way that we will be able to make sense of this feast is by seeing this event in a bigger context. Where is Jesus going from, where is he going to; then we might be able to understand the real significance of this feast.

In fact, this problem is made worse by the fact that we tend to see the events of the life of Jesus in a rather disjointed form. We read this story today, another story another time, and we see the life of Christ almost as an album of still photographs; but it is not an album of stills, it is something much more dynamic than that, it is a motion picture, and indeed it is a fast-moving and action packed film at that. So, if we are going to celebrate the Ascension with understanding, we have to ask where it fits into this vibrant, moving, dynamic action. The broad scope of this story is this: Jesus, in obedience to the Father, leaves behind the glory and the safety of Heaven, takes on human flesh, and comes to share our lives with us; he enables us to become his brothers and sisters, he makes us a part of himself, and then he returns to the Father in

Heaven, taking with him not only his human body but also all those people who have, through baptism, become a part of him.

It is true, then, that at his Ascension Jesus withdraws bodily from his disciples; but that is just one part of what is going on, one tiny scene in the moving picture. Let's concentrate for a moment on where he is going to, not where he is coming from: Jesus is going back to Heaven; he is returning to his true home, to the place he really belongs; even more than that, he is going back to the Father. Ascension Day is a day of such joy in Heaven, because the Father and the Son are reunited, they are back together. They embrace each other with such love, and Jesus can say to the Father 'I have done everything that you asked'. But there is still more than that. Jesus can say 'I have done everything that you asked, and look who I have brought with me'; behind him follows a great crowd of people, all those who have become his brothers and sisters. Jesus does not ascend to Heaven alone, he ascends to Heaven at the front of a queue of saints that stretches down through the centuries to our own day. It is quite a while since I went to a theme park and queued to go on some terrifying rollercoaster ride, but when I did do that I knew that, even though I was half an hour from my destination, the head of the queue was already there. In a sense there was just one line of people, and part of that line was a long way from the end but a part of it had already arrived. So, in a way, the Ascension is not a single day at all, but it is something that will last until the end of time, until the very last person is saved. The Body of Christ has begun to arrive in Heaven, but the whole thing has not yet got there, not by a long way.

So, what is this feast all about? It is not about an event that happened a long time ago. It is about the way in which God and people relate to one another. The relationship between God and his people is not static and distant, it is dynamic and active. By his very nature, God is always on the move, always moving towards us, always searching us out, looking for us, hoping to unfold for us the wonders of a newer, richer way of living; this is made very clear in the incarnation, in Jesus moving from Heaven to live with us on earth - more than living with us, in fact, living as one of us. But the relationship is dynamic in both directions. God is always on the move, coming in search of us, but we are on the move too. Human life is a search for meaning, for

understanding, and therefore the life of every human being is always and inescapably a search for God, even if we do not identify it as such. Jesus comes to live as one of us, and he returns to the Father at the head of the procession of saints, a long line stretching down the generations that we are a part of. We have already begun our own ascension to be with the Father. Ascension Day is a reminder to us that every day of our lives is a part of our journey to God. One of the fundamentals of human existence is that we have a chance to live each day, to make all our decisions, to crystallise our hopes and our longings, as people on the way to the Father. So that is the challenge of this Feast: what does it mean for me to live this day, and every day, as someone who is, together with all of you and countless others, already on my way. Once the Lord has ascended the angels say to the apostles 'Why are you men from Galilee standing here looking into the sky?' What they mean is, don't just stand there, we are on the way, get after him, you are holding things up, there is a cloud of witnesses waiting to follow behind you. Set off on the journey, next stop Heaven!

This homily is based on an insight in Chapter Four of Jean Corbon's 'The Wellspring of Worship' (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988)