

## Ascension Day 2010 RMPA Reunion, Southwick Park

There are plenty of stories in the scriptures of great celebrations sparked off by a welcome arrival. The parable of the prodigal son reaches its climax when the father, who has been looking out night after night in case this might be the day that his son returns, finally sees him coming back, and he rushes to meet him, cutting short the son's apologies and excuses so that he can dress him in fine clothes and hold a great banquet. The son who was lost, as good as dead, has come back, and there is much rejoicing. Similarly, when Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his arrival is greeted with singing and rejoicing, the crowds going wild with excitement and delight. We can probably all bring to mind occasions of celebration because someone great, someone important, someone we love, someone we have missed, has arrived. It is absolutely natural to celebrate arrivals.

The Feast of the Ascension, which we have heard about in today's readings, however, is a story about a departure. The disciples had thought they had lost Jesus for ever on Good Friday, but on Easter Day he was returned to them. Now, just a few short weeks later, he has told them he must leave them again. This time, however, they do not seem to be troubled by his departure. In fact they go back to Jerusalem 'full of joy' and they are continually in the temple praising God. This seems to go against all our instincts. I was flying back from holiday this week, and I did notice that at the airport all the smiles were at arrivals; the departure gate was more the place for tears, or stoical resignation. By and large, departures make us sad, arrivals are greeted with joy (unless you are a bailiff, or a tax inspector, or perhaps a military policeman).

In fact, it did take the disciples a little time to get going. At first they just stood staring into the sky, and it was only when two angels asked them what they thought they were doing that they moved on, and went back to the city. After the crucifixion they were dejected and downcast, with their eyes fixed on the ground; now they are caught up in the wonder of it all, with their eyes looking up to heaven. In the circumstances, each of those reactions is quite understandable, but it can't be allowed to last. People who stand looking up to heaven are about as much practical use as people who hang their heads and look at the ground; neither of them can see what's going on around them, they cannot have any sensible sort of interaction with anybody else, and you wouldn't back their chances of getting safely across a road. Life must go on. So Jesus disciples, who have just said farewell to him once again, go back to the city together, full of joy.

There are two things, I think, that contribute to the joy they feel when Jesus leaves them. The first is the fact that they know what is coming next; the second is that, being together with Jesus and with each other has given them a deep and powerful sense of identity and purpose. It does seem to me that this story has a great deal to say to us. It offers us a ray of hope because, whoever we may be, whatever our circumstances in life may be, in many ways the art of living happily, the way to get through life – and more than that, to make something great, and wonderful, and good of life, is to learn how to cope with the departures, with the partings. From our earliest days, life is a succession of departures, of partings: moving house, moving school, moving jobs, drifting away from old friends, saying goodbye to people we have loved

as old age or sickness carries them from this life into the next. We can never be really happy, never be really at peace with ourselves and with the world, unless we have learned how to cope with this succession of partings. Looking in from the outside, from the civilian world, based on what I see and what I hear, this is probably more true of life in the forces than anywhere else. For people in the armed forces, and for their families, these partings are intensified, crammed closer together and made more powerful by their frequency and by the underlying truth that they bear a heavier burden of risk than is usual for the rest of us. So often these partings are overshadowed by ‘what if...’; sadly, too often they are final partings at a graveside. So perhaps it is true for the soldier even more than for the rest of us that learning how to deal with parting is an essential part of staying healthy and fulfilled in life.

I mentioned just now two things that help contribute to the fact that Jesus’ friends are full of joy, even though he has left them. He tells them to wait together until they are clothed with the power from on high. They know that this parting is not the end, it is not final, because there are still good things to come. They are not left without hope, hope that however the present may be the future will be better. This gift of hope is something fundamental to human life. I am firmly convinced that as a Christian one of my fundamental roles is to be an apostle of hope. It is a part of my job, and in fact it is a part of the job of every one of us who wants to make the world a better place, to search in every situation for the seeds of hope that make some kind of future possible. Jesus’ disciples do not know exactly what the future will hold, but they know that there will be a future, and that is good. The Lord has helped them catch a glimpse of hope for the future, and that has made his departure something more positive. The second thing that we discover in this story is the importance of some sense of common life, of shared values but more than that, a real sharing in one another’s lives. After the crucifixion, Jesus followers scattered; after the Ascension, they stay together. The time they have spent together with the Lord has transformed them. Once again, they do not know what the future holds, but they know that it will be ok – perhaps it will not all be good, perhaps it will be harsh and difficult, but at least it will be ok, because experience has shown them they are not alone, and that the things that really matter to them, really matter to other people too. That is why the values which sustain our armed forces are so precious, and that is why we are so shaken when we find someone has slipped and thrown away the high standards which you hold so dear. You are right to be proud of past achievements – not just in the distant past, but in recent months, weeks, days, perhaps even as we speak as well. It is these shared values and shared achievements which sustain you in difficult times, and they are one of the crucial things that help us make sense of the partings. So we must treasure them. Sometimes it can be tempting to let things slip a bit – no-one will notice, just a short-cut here; or, it’s my only vice, surely I can be allowed that. Dag Hammarskjöld once wrote “He who wants to keep his garden tidy does not reserve a plot for weeds”, and he is right: if we want to live a life that gives hope to others, that is all or nothing.

I’m glad to spend some time with you thinking about The Ascension. I am sure that our happiness and our wholeness depends so much on learning to cope with parting, and that in turn depends on our ability to shine the light of hope into troubled, damaged lives, and to find meaning and strength in the values and achievements that bind us together.