

How we live and how we die are connected.

Thursday was Ascension Day. We should not be distracted by the use of the word ‘ascend’ and ‘descend’ in connection with these two events: in the cosmology of the day heaven was ‘up’ and earth was ‘down’ and we need to accept that world view. Incidentally, God was not necessarily thought of as dwelling in heaven, which is but another part of his creation, but beyond it for – as Solomon said – even the highest heavens cannot contain him.

More important than the direction of travel of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is the source and destination of each journey: Jesus’s ascension links earth and heaven. Jesus, who came from God’s presence to dwell on earth and share our human nature, now returns to God’s presence taking his human nature with him. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus, comes from God’s presence to empower the holy people of God on earth, as once at creation he moved over the face of the earth.

Ascension was a time of departure as well as arrival and departures involve last words. On the eve of Ascension Day, at Evensong, the Old Testament reading began, “Now these are the last words of David” and we heard the same reading at Matins this morning. The theme is picked up in today’s readings when we are held, liturgically, between the departure of Jesus to his Father and the arrival of the Holy Spirit which we celebrate next Sunday. As I read these scriptures, I was struck by the last words that they contain. Maybe I’m particularly sensitive to that having spent many hours at the end of last year holding my mother’s hand as she was dying. I am not sure what my last words to her were that she understood, although I can recall her last words to me. With hindsight it is easy to think of things I wish I had said. But at the time you do what you can and presence and hand-holding speaks as loudly as words.

So, if O’Rourke wants us to be reading something that makes us look good at our death, today’s scriptures challenge is about what we say to people before our final parting. We heard Jesus’s last words to the disciples and their last words to him, as well as Jesus’s last prayer to his Father in heaven. To the disciples, overhearing this prayer, his trust, albeit tinged with apprehension at the cruelty of his coming death, is clear. Jesus’s words of love and joyful trust in them might have surprised them.

In Acts Jesus had gathered his apostles for one last conversation and their last words to him were a question. I wonder, had they known this was the final moment, if they would have ended things this way or said something else. But asked this question: was this when he would restore the kingdom to Israel? They had not previously bothered about this; Luke records many sayings of Jesus about the kingdom of God but not about it being restored to Israel.

So just as the disciples try to narrow the saving work of God to one nation, Jesus blows it all open by responding in effect, “Never mind that. Get on with being my witnesses all over the world. Not only where you are relatively comfortable – Jerusalem [although that was not a safe place, they were so afraid of the religious leaders that they locked themselves in] and Judea [familiar territory], but also Samaria [despised territory avoided by faithful Jews] and to the ends of the earth [way beyond anywhere any of them had previously gone].” Jesus did not send them back home to preach the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles suggests they never did go home, at least permanently. The ascension is disruptive of comfortable life.

Since Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday it is too easily overlooked. So, on this Sunday after the Ascension, here is an important question: What would the Christian gospel look like without the ascension of Jesus?

Without the ascension of Christ we would be without our hope of heaven. Why? Isn't the resurrection enough? It is vital but, on its own, it is not enough. There are fifty days of Easter and the 40th is Ascension Day. Easter isn't over with the resurrection. The resurrection was evidence that death is conquered, that God has destroyed its power to have the last word. But to what end? That we should hang around on earth for ever? Given the state of our world, that is a pretty dreadful prospect and it was to spare Adam and Eve from that fate once they had sinned that God made their life time-limited.

Without the ascension, the resurrection is the conquering of death but leaves us here on earth. The ascension of Jesus Christ, fully divine and with a place by right with God the Father, is also the ascension of one who was fully human, who took his humanity – our humanity – into heaven and opened the door for all humanity to follow. The world-changing significance of the ascension of Jesus Christ is that there is a human in heaven, previously inhabited only by the heavenly hosts. In the words of the Te Deum, the ancient song of the church, 'He has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers'. As the creed affirms, our hope is in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. The ascension, an integral part of the fifty days of Easter, assures us that, in Christ, there is a place in heaven for us. In the ascension, Jesus Christ opened heaven to all believers.

Are we ready for heaven? I hope the answer is yes. Ready to leave the earth? That takes me back to where I started. It is not just that we should look good because of what we are reading when we die, but that our lives should be good, all the time, so that whenever death comes we are found to be living well in the joyful knowledge that by his ascension Jesus Christ has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

St Benedict told his monks to keep their death before their eyes. Are there any things you and I need to put right quickly so that we are ready to die whenever that time comes? I ask that question in the glorious assurance that the Ascension has opened the gate of heaven to us and that, as the gospel reminded us, eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, and that begins on earth.

Impending death may focus our minds, as it did for Stephen Sutton, but most of us do not know when we will die. I had an e-mail this week from someone who is helping us to prepare for our commemoration of the Great War by transcribing extracts from the First World War diaries of Hensley Henson, Dean of Durham at the time. He included this extract from 7th March 1915 in which Hensley records a brief conversation with someone who interrupted his university study to serve in the Durham Light Infantry:

“I celebrated the Holy Communion at 8 a.m. Hugh was among the communicants. I said to him afterwards, ‘If we should never meet again, this parting were well made.’”

What a blessing to be able to say our partings are well made. Jesus's prayerful parting on earth from his heavenly Father was well made. His ascension was a parting well made from the disciples.

This Ascension-tide I am challenged to consider whether my life is in such order that, were I to die today, I would leave with partings well made, with a book that I would feel good about being seen to have been reading, and with people able to say the world is a better place for my having lived in it. You and I are called to live as we would wish to be found at death.

For the disciples, their parting conversation with Jesus was a question that propelled them into mission. In the light of the ascension they were sent to be his witnesses. That is, in fact, a parting well made. After all, it is the parting we make each week at the end of the Eucharist. ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.’

