

Ascension Day 2017

At Morning Prayer during the past weeks since Easter Day we use the words, "Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, tells us that Jesus is the first person in the new kingdom. He is like Adam, who was the first human being in our earthly creation, (as the Bible story shows us), so Jesus is the first to enter a new creation, the Kingdom of God. On Easter day Jesus rose from the dead but later on he had to say a goodbye to his friends, those he had lived alongside and ministered among. Jesus appeared to the disciples on a number of occasions and could disappear - this must have been both shocking and thrilling for his friends, but he couldn't stay with them forever, the great miracle of his risen body had to have a conclusion for faith to flourish. Jesus had to fully enter the kingdom and leave the earthly creation behind. He had been moving between the two, appearing when needed to his friends and then disappearing, not fully in the world as John tells us in his gospel. And so, today we remember Jesus becoming the first fruit, the new Adam as he fully enters the kingdom of heaven to be with the Father, Risen and Ascended. As today's collect says, this is the first time that human nature is raised to the throne of heaven. Jesus, human and divine, ascends to his Father and our father, giving us hope, which is at the centre of our faith. Hope that we will also join him and the Father in heaven.

Christian hope, I was reminded by Fr David, is an interesting theme for today. Hope is one of the three theological virtues - faith, hope and charity - described by St Paul as the bases of the Christian life. It may be defined as 'the desire and search for a future good.' Our daily hopes, for good weather or a good result in our exams are about our earthly and material needs, but Christian hope is about a confidence in God's goodness, in his love for us, in his justice which will be parental, like a father or mother (done out of love for us).

Our epistle reminds us that we pray to know the hope that God has called us too. This hope Paul describes as a glorious inheritance among the saints, those who have gone before us praying for us and continuing to do good on earth, as Jesus continues to work on earth through his body the church - that is you and me! Jesus is particularly with us in the Eucharist pouring out his graces in word and sacrament - Jesus' spiritual body not confined to time or a particular place - he makes himself known in broken bread and wine outpoured.

We celebrate our hope each week in the words, "Christ had died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." When will he come? He will come when the

work of the body of Christ is finished. So our hope is also our challenge - to get on with the work that Christ Jesus has given us - to work with love for families and friends, for whole communities and nations. This is never more apparent to us than in the atrocities that took place in Manchester this week. The work of Christ to bring peace and love to everyone, to break down divisions and make us one united in love is at the heart of the aftermath of such a tragedy. May God be present in Manchester at this time. A prayer that is on our hearts.

Prayer, our time with God, being open to God, is this not a visit to heaven while on earth. We can visit heaven in our prayers, being one with the Father through Jesus his Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit, (and never more than at the Eucharist), - for while we are with Jesus in the bread and wine, we are also with our Father God. It was through wounds that our salvation was brought into the world and it is through our wounds that he pours grace into the world, for as we share in suffering we share Christ's victory. This suffering unites us with Christ in our mortal life and prepares us for our immortality, our sure hope, of arriving with him in the glory of the Father.

This hope for our heavenly future, that Jesus has shown us the way towards in his ascension is the reason why today is a celebration. It may be a remembered farewell for the disciples but it is a welcome to a future sharing in glory, as Jesus goes to prepare a place for us.

Amen.