

A letter from Canon David Nason

Dear Friends,

Next Thursday is Ascension Day, one of the great festivals of the Christian Church. It takes place exactly forty days after Easter and it celebrates the end of Christ's earthly work and his return to heaven. Of all the great festivals, Ascension Day is I think one of the most difficult to understand. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of a baby, on Good Friday the drama of the cross and crucifixion and on Easter Day the empty tomb. All of these are stories of human dramas that we can understand, empathise with and become part of but on Ascension Day what exactly are we celebrating?

According to Luke we are celebrating Jesus 'going up' into heaven and a cloud hiding him from our sight. For many years Luke's wonderful word picture presented no problems but nowadays many of us have been above the clouds and the old idea of heaven being up there, no longer rings true. The problem is that we are trying to talk about heavenly matters in earthly terms. In theological terms the Ascension represents the glorification of Christ, as the great hymn says 'Risen, Ascended, Glorified'. The exalted or ascended Christ is also the reigning Christ with sovereignty not only over his Church but over the whole of Creation.

In simpler terms it marks an end and a beginning, the end of Christ's time on earth and the beginning of his heavenly ministry through the promised Holy Spirit whose coming we celebrate at Pentecost. Ends and beginnings are something that we can all relate to. The current pandemic marked the end of our life BC, (before coronavirus) and when it is over it will mark the beginning of a new era AD (after the disease). During this time of lockdown, I am sure that many of you, like me are realising just how much we take for granted. Regular trips to the theatre, restaurants and holidays abroad and yes even our own mortality. When we are apprised of the constantly rising tally of deaths in our country, I always pray for those who have departed, for their families and I give grateful thanks that I am still here to write this letter.

Last Friday was VE Day, which we celebrated in a somewhat muted fashion and of course comparisons were made with our current situation. In many ways there are similarities. "Never in the field of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few." The immortal words of Churchill which referred to the wartime RAF and which could easily be applied to our current frontline workers both in the NHS and all the other support occupations and services. I am sure that as the war ended and the post war period began, people realised that life would never be the same again.

In the story of Noah from the book of Genesis, when the floods subsided and the family emerged from the ark, God gave Noah a sign. It was a sign of hope. It was a rainbow, a sign that we too have adopted in the current crisis, a sign of hope for the future. A hope that when this pandemic is over, we will emerge into a better world. A world in which caring and sharing are paramount and will overshadow greed and selfishness.

Ascensiontide, as I said earlier, is about endings and new beginnings but one thing is constant and universal throughout and that is God's love is always there for us. His love shown through Christ's ministry and teaching here on earth, his love that we as Christians are now commissioned to carry out.

My very best wishes to you all and also a prayer that you will be kept safe and stay well.

Father David