

Ascension Day 2020

Acts 1: 4-11

Luke 24: 40-the end

Do you remember the last time you saw some of the people you've been unable to see again since the lockdown? Did you give an extra squeeze when you hugged them goodbye? Did you make promises to speak to them every week, even though you couldn't physically see them? Did you give each other reassurances that you would see each other again once all this was over? How did you feel as you said goodbye?

This year Ascension Day is unlike any we will have known before. And yet I can't help thinking that the Ascension of Jesus, this year perhaps more than most, resonates with our current situation, and might offer us some hope for our current circumstances.

On the surface that might seem to be just a statement offering an empty platitude to people who have been separated from loved ones, are watching grief and pain around them, or experiencing it themselves, are prevented from standing alongside those who desperately need to reach out to a physical presence, and those who are unable to find solace by entering a place that is a source of comfort and strength; their church.

But I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that when he writes of the ascension of Jesus, Luke takes great effort to demonstrate that the very same Jesus who became incarnate and who died, is the Jesus who ascends to heaven. At this moment of the gospel, Luke shows us the scars of Jesus.

He shows us that the body in which Jesus ascends is not perfectly formed, flawless flesh. No, the body that ascends to heaven, ascends with the scars that Jesus acquired whilst he lived and died on earth; and that means that Jesus ascends as a disabled God. That is quite a bold statement, I admit, but if it causes some discomfort, perhaps we might first stop and ask ourselves why that is.

Jesus has holes in his wrists and his feet. He has a spear wound in his side. We can't even begin to comprehend the kind of nerve and joint damage that comes from the torture Jesus endured. We shouldn't underestimate the immense stress that his mind and spirit were put under as he was abandoned by his friends and isolated in his moment of need, as he was taken to be crucified and nailed to the cross. His scars are real, markers of his identity, just as ours are real.

In the words of Nancy Eisland, "Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God."

The flesh of the ascended Jesus is not just real human flesh, it is flesh that has taken on the fullness of human life by embracing pain and disability, not casting it aside at the first opportunity, but suffering it, carrying it and then sharing it with his closest friends.

Jesus' scars cause us to pause and consider our own contexts and the contexts of those around us, by challenging the view that to have faith means to not have scars, to have faith means to not have weakness; even the sinless one can be scarred, physically and mentally. Our mental and physical scars are not a sign of weakness or being inadequate, but rather a way of being human in the world.

How different would the world be if, instead of telling people who live with scars that they are different from other humans, we instead told them how like Jesus they are! The scarred Jesus is a survivor of trauma, and he bears its marks in his body.

What are the scars that you might bear from the circumstances you are living in now, or have lived through previously?

Jesus' ascension can be a comfort to all who bear scars. The ascension is good news for human bodies because it means that a human body is already glorified and in heaven, and that Jesus Christ, who is that body, is profoundly aware of what it means to be human.

As the author of Hebrews says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses."

No, we have a High priest who has lived as one of us, died as one of us, born scars like us and for us, and who chose not to ascend to heaven without those scars, but bearing them. He ascended with his scars, and invites us to come to him with ours.

And with those scarred hands, Jesus offers to carry our burdens, our pain, our grief, our mental health concerns, our illnesses and our scars. And with those scarred hands, he can bring us to a place of hope, not removing the scars, but moving to a place where instead those scars speak of the journey that we have made, the burdens we have carried, and the new life that we have found in the love of God, shown through the scarred hands of Jesus. The scarred hands that Jesus, as his final act on earth, lifted up and with them blessed his companions.

Whatever scars we bear when we emerge from our current situation, may we bring them to Christ, confident in the scars that he himself bears, that speak of his immense love for us, and that were lifted up in blessing of others.

Amen