

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	17 May 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Seventh Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

We are in the time of the Ascension which we celebrated on Thursday but today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us the story once again. I'd like to suggest three encouragements that this extraordinary event in our lives as Christians.

**First, Jesus's ascension encourages us to look upwards.** One of my favourite representations of it is in the Ascension Chapel at the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. If you have been there, you will probably remember that if you look up to the ceiling you see a cloud with Jesus's feet sticking out of it as he ascends. This reflects what we hear in today's first reading from the book of Acts: 'as the apostles were watching, Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight'.

In various parts of the Bible, a cloud signifies the presence of God. For example, when the people of Israel are travelling through the desert, we hear that 'the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Ex 40.34). When Gabriel announces to Mary, he speaks of her being 'overshadowed' with the Lord's presence, like a cloud. At Jesus's transfiguration, as the Father speaks, a 'bright cloud' overshadows Jesus and his disciples (Mt 17.5).

So, Jesus going physically upwards is a sort of picture language for his return to the Father, rather than something we take in a literal sense. And yet, the Ascension encourages up to an upward movement. As the wonderful collect for Ascension Day says, 'like as

we do believe... our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so may we in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell'. It encourages us, as we look to Christ to try and set our minds in the heavenly places; to seek activities, pleasures, things to read, things to watch that are elevated and not debased. To do what we say we are doing whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, 'lift up our hearts to the Lord';

**Secondly, the Ascension encourages us to expect a happy ending.** I remember reading a few years ago an article about the Ascension by a writer<sup>1</sup> who loves to watch films noirs. These are the films that emerged out of the era of the Great Depression in America, and they are, as their name implies, dark, downbeat and depressing. Similarly, many people also like so-called Scandinoir books and films from Scandinavian countries, set in bleak landscapes with a dark and complex take on human psychology. Many modern philosophers have echoed the message, telling us us that life is essentially dark and depressing, or even absolutely futile and pointless.

The story of Holy Week and Easter knows, of course, how to do depressing: it takes us to places that are as dark as we can get as we contemplate Jesus feeling utterly desolate in the Garden of Gethsemane; being betrayed by his friends who forsake him, and feeling God-forsaken as he hangs on the cross. So, the events that we have contemplated in church over recent weeks most certainly do have moments of darkness and despair.

But if we do feel drawn towards gloomy books and films, or gloomy and nihilistic philosophy or just personal feelings of joylessness and pessimism, the Ascension ultimately points us in a different direction. For it shows us wonderfully that the story of Jesus is ultimately very different from that of a film noir. For this is a story that ends in Jesus's return to the Father in glory and with the promise

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Davison

that we are going to share that glory as well: to ascend with him to the heavenly places. So it is ultimately a story of triumph; a story of hope. As we might think on this Ascension Day, an uplifting story. As children, we all liked stories which end 'happily ever after'. And the ascension is perhaps the best known of them all.

**Finally, the ascension encourages us to hope for an enduring presence.** There's an interesting detail in St Luke's account of the ascension in his gospel. After Jesus has ascended, we hear that the disciples 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy'. On the face of it, that seems rather strange. Jesus, their leader, has been taken away from them – not, to be sure, in the way he was taken away on Good Friday, but you would still expect them not to be particularly happy about it; you'd expect them to feel that once again they had been bereaved: left alone and abandoned. But no, St Luke says: they returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God.

The reason that they remain so joyful is that at his ascension, Jesus has not passed off into some remote corner of the universe. Although he is no longer with them in the way that he once was, they are able to be joyful because they have no doubt that Jesus remains with them, but in a new and different way. Ascended to the glory of the Father, he is at what the Bible describes as the 'right hand of God' and because of this he will be permanently among them and permanently close to them, not in the same way that he had been before, but in 'the way that only God can be close to us'.<sup>2</sup>

So, as he stretches out his hands in blessing upon them, they are not mourning a friend who is leaving them, but quite the reverse: they have hearts full of joy because the ascended Christ will now always be with them. They will know his presence as they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit that will be given to them at Pentecost. They will know his presence whenever they celebrate the Eucharist and

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<sup>2</sup> Ratzinger, J., *Jesus of Nazareth, Holy Week*, p. 293.

experience the risen Lord among them in the breaking of the bread. They will know his presence in their hearts and lives as, in the words of our own St Richard, 'teacher, friend and brother'. It is because he has ascended that Jesus can be always with us and among us, and our own hearts also can be filled with joy.