

To Make an End is to Make a Beginning

**Year B
The Ascension**

“What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.”

So wrote T S Eliot in the Four Quartets.

The tone of our liturgy, the sense of having been building up to this event for the last forty days feels almost like a conclusion. Jesus ascends into heaven, the final vindication of the Father on his ministry, death and resurrection. Far above all rulers and authorities St Paul tells us. The sense of triumph in today’s liturgy is unmistakable. Christ ascends into the heavens and sits down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Job done. Feet up. Cup of tea or a G&T, please.

Except that it’s not quite is it? If we’ve been listening carefully to the Scriptures, the end is where we, you and I, start from. Luke, in both the gospel and in the book of Acts, is clear that this is just the start.

“Men of Galilee,” the angel asks, “why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” It echoes Jesus on the road to Emmaus, asking the two disciples why

they are so glum. You can imagine the stage directions given to the disciples as they point speechlessly to the empty patch of ground that Jesus was on and then into the heavens. “Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?” In Luke, both Jesus and the angel direct the disciples’ gaze back down to earth. Now we might want to look up to the heavens, to understand what has happened. St Paul certainly directs our vision heavenwards in his letter, to see, as St Leo the Great said, “our poor human nature was carried up in Christ above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father.” There is a man in heaven, who ever lives to intercede for us.

It is always the temptation to look up, to look out. It has been the challenge of Eastertide that when we talk about eternal life or resurrection life, we are not solely talking about life after death but life before death. It is the temptation of the Ascension, and of the Second Coming, that we gaze into heaven looking for Jesus’ return, ignoring the world around us. And to be honest it’s a temptation that is appealing. Because when we look around us, life is hard. The immediate effects of cancer and suicide on young people and their families, that we in this church have held over the last few weeks; a divided and lost society, too many feeling unheard and undervalued while others feel threatened and vulnerable; an international order inevitably giving in to the

weight of compromises and deals in place of justice; and even the cracks and the crises in our own lives, or those around us. It is easier to look up at Jesus on the right hand of Majesty.

But it is precisely because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father in majesty that we can look down and around. It is because Jesus is interceding for us that we can have confidence in our prayers, but we can only pray when we know what we need to pray for, honestly and urgently. It is precisely because our human nature has been elevated to the heights of heaven that we know that the diminishing of any human's dignity is not the last word, that a politics of division does not come from the throne of heaven. It is precisely because God has received Christ on high that we know the saving power of the cross and the death defeating power of the resurrection are a real part of our lives and of the universe.

The journey that we began at Advent seems to have come to an end. Only now Jesus tells the disciples that their journey is about to begin. Wait, and then go, go to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, go to the ends of the world. After the resurrection they were told to follow Jesus to Galilee, now the ends of the world aren't even limits enough.

As we approach the end of Eastertide so we approach the beginning of this new work of eternal life here and now and in this place. The Feast of the Ascension reminds us that the work of Christ is now ours, Teresa of Avila reminded us of that when she said, “Christ has no body on earth now but yours.”

In the same way that Jesus was in the middle of the everyday life around him so too are we called to be. The Ascension doesn't or shouldn't draw our attention up it draws it down to the world around us, to where we need to take Christ. We might be approaching the end of Eastertide, but the end is where you and I start from.