

The ascension of Christ

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Ascension: Acts 1 1-11, Ps 110, Eph 1 15-23, Lk 24 44-53

How do you say goodbye for the last time to someone you love? Is there a right way? Or do you just do your best when the time comes and pray that it won't hurt too much?

How do you say goodbye for the last time? Is there a positive side to goodbyes? *Good-bye*? What's *good* about it? It often feels more like a cut; a burn; a wound. But of course the old *OED* sets us straight. There I find that our word *goodbye* began life as a contraction of *God-be-wy-ye* –*God be with you*.

Doesn't that transform it utterly! It's not a final leave-taking after all, but a blessing; not a threat of loneliness, but a reminder of our deepest relationship of all; our mutual belonging to God, which binds us together forever; beyond distance, beyond time, beyond even death. Goodbye is a *blessing* and a *promise*. *God be with you*. *Blessing and promise*: this is the *goodbye* Jesus offers today as we celebrate his Ascension. It's the last time his friends will ever see him in the flesh; but he makes the focus of this parting a blessing.

The book of Acts sets Jesus' final parting from his friends forty days after his resurrection on Easter Day. For three years on the road together, they'd become closer than family. These friends had been through the horror of losing him to the Cross; and now through the incredulous joy of reunion with him after he rose from the dead.

But today, it's goodbye again. Yet not goodbye in the final leave-taking sense. No; it's in the *God be wy ye* sense. Jesus promises them that they will receive power from God (Lk 24.49); the Holy Spirit will *baptize* them soon and they will become Jesus' powerful witnesses from here to the ends of the

earth (Acts 1.8).

Of course they don't understand this straight away; these poor battered disciples. Who could? Their hopes had been dashed, then raised again, and now Jesus is again taken from their sight. But in a very short time, we *will* see them changed. A frightened huddle of outlaws one minute; the next, they burst out of hiding. Filled with that promised gift of spiritual power, they will go out, reckless and passionate, with a transforming message about Jesus. And just as he said they would, starting right outside their door, they will press on, healing and preaching to the ends of the earth.

Ascension is the story of Jesus's body going from the here-and-now to the always-and-everywhere. That's a pretty fine summary of our human experience of Jesus' Ascension – again, it takes our view beyond the resurrection where our attention can so often stop.

The here-and-now? Before his crucifixion, Jesus' ministry was confined mostly to the place he happened to be at the time (healing the centurion's servant boy without going to his home in Lk 7 is an exception of course). But after his resurrection Jesus seemed less confined. He'd appear to disciples who were a long way apart from each other, yet without needing time to get from one lot of disciples to the others in any normal way. He wasn't a ghost; he ate with them and they touched him; he had the wounds of his crucifixion – but he was different. He was somehow even more extraordinary than he'd been over the few years of his ministry with them.

This 'different' Jesus was a promise of more to come; much more. Today, as we've seen him ascend to the right hand of the Father, that difference between Jesus and us is taken to a whole new level.

And this reminds me that I talk and think so often of Jesus the *human being* that I risk forgetting to balance this by

proclaiming that he is the ruler of everything – that he is *our God*. The Ascension puts my focus back on the big picture.

The Ascension is the fourth of the Church's five most important celebrations of Jesus: there's Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost. Ascension *is* goodbye, but only so that a different, more universal hello can begin – and we'll be looking at that new beginning on Sunday week – Pentecost.

Then we'll realise again the full meaning of our word *goodbye*; how it began life as a contraction of *God-be-wy-ye* – *God be with you*.

As long as we live, in the goodbye of the Ascension, we are given the gift of God with us, closer than our own skin, for all eternity.

Amen.

Commitment prayer: Risen, ascended Jesus, we are now the bearers of your *God-be-wy-ye* blessing. You want everyone to receive the blessing of your reconciling love? We know this blessing, and we're ready to share it. We pray that you may make us bold to speak of you. Amen