

HOORAY FOR JESUS! ASCENSION DAY (A)

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In our Creed today we will be saying of Jesus: '*He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*' What picture comes to mind when we think of Jesus ascending to heaven? Do we picture him going up into the stratosphere like a space ship at Cape Canaveral? If we do, we show that we don't realize that the words of scripture about this are not to be taken literally. They are a pictorial and poetic way of saying that Jesus is no longer on earth in a physical and material way. In his risen transformed body he has gone to God and lives with God in light and glory. They mean that God who raised him from the dead has honoured and exalted him.

His going to God is the climax of his life on earth. He now enjoys full face-to-face encounter with God. That's what we call '*being in heaven*'. But being with God in heaven he became, in the words of our Psalm today, '*great king over all the earth*', in close contact with our world and its inhabitants.

For forty days he kept appearing to different groups of his followers to strengthen their faith, trust and love. Since Easter Sunday we too have had forty days for thinking about all the different ways in which we still experience Jesus meeting and guiding us. Vatican II has emphasised this: '*Christ is always present in the church [community], and especially in her liturgical celebrations*' (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #7). For the last forty days, then, we have in fact been giving particular attention to his presence in the liturgy and especially the Eucharist. There in special ways his love keeps radiating out to us.

We experience his presence and love in our being with one another, our fellow-followers of Jesus. We experience his presence and love in listening to and taking to heart the message of the Readings, in which he keeps speaking to us words from God. We experience his presence and love when we come to his table. There he gives us his body broken for us and his blood and life poured out for us. We experience his presence and love also in our priest leading us in prayer, and in our readers, ministers of communion, musicians, singers and altar servers, all servants of Christ in our shared celebrations. Finally, we experience his presence and love as we go back into the world from which we came - strengthened, refreshed, and more determined than ever to make our world a better place, by our loving outreach to all sorts of needy people.

As we keep on being '*good news*' people, people who live what we hear and believe, Jesus our Risen Lord stays with us. In the words of the Gospel today, he stays with us '*always ... to the end of time*'. The forty days of his continuing presence to his first disciples are, in fact, a powerful symbol of the Christian journey of our lives as well. It's a journey in which he walks and talks with us every step of the way, just as he walked and talked with those two friends travelling with him from Jerusalem to

Emmaus that first Easter Sunday afternoon.

Today, however, we might rather forget about us and just look at him, and express our joy that at the end of his life's journey, God raised Jesus to life and took him to himself in the eternal embrace of love that is '*heaven*'. Just like us, Jesus spent his life dreaming of this day. His whole being longed to see God face-to-face, and to enjoy without distraction the communion of love for which we are all created and for which at least deep down we are all yearning. So today we say '*Hooray for Jesus!*' that he has reached his destination. His time of waiting and his time of suffering are over. Nothing now can ever come between the longings of his heart and the joy of their fulfilment in God.

So, in short, we rejoice that he remains forever in communion with God the Father and with you and me, his body on earth. Nothing, nothing at all, can stop the love of God that keeps beating in the great heart of Jesus.

Lastly, our celebration of his ascension reminds us to let ourselves experience the absence of Jesus as well as his presence. Like his first followers we are sad at his no longer being here with us in the flesh, where we might see him, hear him and touch him. But missing his physical presence reminds us that we are not meant to find our final home in this world. Our journey continues, a journey of both joy and suffering, as was his. Meanwhile, let him encourage us with his Last Supper words: '*I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may also be*' (John 14:3)!