

ASCENSION

Year A

It's only a simple gesture..... Extinguishing of the Easter Candle after the Gospel of the Ascension. But it carries its own realization. It's over. Jesus has gone. His work is done and he has left us, although not abandoned us. He has left us to work at our Christianity, to work out the consequences of our faith, to take on the terrible freedom of forming our own lives and being responsible for them. You know, in my own journey I have always felt that the greatest gift God has given me is my freedom. It's that freedom to make choices that makes me a human being with dignity..... animals can't make choices the way I do. And that freedom to choose makes me different to every one of you. I am unique. In God's sight I am "one off." But I'm also aware that that freedom brings with it personal responsibility. I have to be aware of the consequences of my choices. I can't blame other people.

Now we have put out the light of the paschal candle; but we can extinguish the light there in the belief that that light burns somewhere else – that we have caught the light ourselves, and that it burns in our own hearts.

I know I've told you before about the ancient tale of God's original problem - But just in case you've forgotten - where to conceal his most precious possession, his own image. He called three wise counselors, to listen to their suggestions. The first advised God to put his image on top of the highest mountain on earth, where it would be safe forever. God, however, knowing that one day Mount Everest would be conquered, declined the suggestion. The second wise man proposed that God should put his image in the depths of the deepest sea; but God saw submarines in his mind's eye and said no. The third suggested that God hide his image on the far side of the moon; but God smiled to himself and said that even there man could reach it. Then God had his original idea: "I know where to conceal my image" He said. "I will put it in a place where people will never think of looking. I will put it into their hearts. There, it will never be discovered." And the three wise men nodded in agreement; they knew that God was indeed right.

The image of God, the light of God, is in the place where we rarely look: in our heart. We need to discover that God's presence is within us. When St. Augustine discussed the Ascension in the fourth chapter of his *Confessions* he made the same point: "He withdrew from our eyes that we

might return to our own heart to find him.” When the light goes out on the paschal candle, do we find that light nearer home, in our own heart ? That light is the Spirit of the risen Christ.

When Christ comes to dwell in our heart, he never comes alone. He brings his values and his hopes; he brings his dreams and expectations – all of which he invites us to share. But he also brings the poor and the blind and the crippled; he brings the outcast and the stranger and the legion of the overlooked.

Christ never comes alone. And when he comes we realize that the visiting team may look more like a circus parade than a divine procession. Like the innkeepers of the world, we might be tempted to put up a “no vacancy” sign, to tell Jesus that we have no room in our heart for his busload of supporters and for his theological baggage. But one thing is certain: we cannot take him in and leave the rest outside.

Long before his ascension, Jesus took a lot of people to heart. He suffered because of his passionate love for others. He paid a price for taking so many people to heart. But he treasured them, in all their pettiness and lopsided resolve, with all their thin aspirations and crazy ambitions, with all their private preoccupations and hidden fears. With all of this, his heart began to look more like an emergency ward than a treasure room.

The challenge of Jesus to us is to open our hearts to his kind of people. When we let them in, he slips in among them. Who will take to heart the poor and the elderly, the sick and the Scrooges of this world ?

Of course we know that many people do. The quiet people who nurse and wash and dress the decay of old age, those who do daily rounds in psychiatric clinics and hospitals, those who choose to work in slums and appalling living conditions. Their large heartedness makes the rest of us humble, and our own troubles and preoccupations seem so paltry compared with the huge demands they face with commitment and humour.

We can only try to make more room in our heart for Jesus’ people, and we can do that in the Gospel truth that he will be at the heart of all that we try to do.