

Sermon Feast of the Ascension 2020

We give thanks to God that this past week some of our services here are now able to be freely attended, with some limits remaining in place. We slowly claw our way toward something resembling normality. We begin to leave our isolation and the caves of our solitude and seclusion and begin to move about more freely. But even if these past days there has been a rush of enthusiasm and excitement, for many the eased restrictions has been met with caution and ambivalence.

Studies have shown that people's anxiety levels have never been higher. People have never been more stressed. As we know, there have been stresses in adapting to new requirements in home, work, schooling and relationships. Parents have had to become teachers. Workers have had to make their homes – which ought to be a sanctuary from the drudgery of employment – their workplaces. Friends, family and loved ones have been far from us. Our usual activities which nurture and feed the soul have been put on hold. Many have lost jobs. Businesses have closed. Yes, it has given rise to some expressions of creativity. Yes, we have shown how adaptable we can be. And yes, we have shown what we can actually do without. But the compounding of demands *has* left us stressed. People remain anxious about what might be 'out there', what the future may yet hold, what uncertainty may still wait for us.

And this on the back of the phenomenon of climate-anxiety, a noted pathology of our age. Not helped by some political movements actively advocating a sort of hatred for our own species! And this foisted on our young through main-stream education systems! It is not at all uncommon now for many of our young people to swear off bearing children and raising families precisely because of their anxiety, the fear of a supposed uncertain future. This fails to recognise, of course, the supreme irony that the bearing of children and the raising of families is the supreme sign of optimism, the greatest gift of hope our world needs!

The danger with succumbing to this fear, stress and anxiety is that they turn us in on ourselves. In them we limit our horizon. We fail to look above and beyond. They close us in, shut us off and paralyse us. Now, for the Christian we know that there *is* an inner life, an interior life, which we must - if we are faithful to our calling - nurture and develop. Our inner life is not fed by fear, stress and anxiety. And it is not mere introspection. The nurturing of our interior life is so to open us to the biggest horizon there is: our life with God!

This Feast of the Ascension reminds us of that biggest, ultimate horizon that we, as people of faith, must keep our eyes fixed upon. The collect set for this day puts it thus: *that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so may we also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell.*

Only by looking up, only by knowing our destiny, only by knowing the temporality of our existence here, only by knowing the hope of our calling can we live well here and now. Only by looking up that we can properly anchor ourselves in this transitory life. Only by keeping our horizon fixed above will we ensure that both our inner life and our engagement with the world is properly oriented. Christ ascends to heaven to take his place at the right hand of the Father. Looking above in hope – to the very place which is our destiny - will preserve us from vain introspection and mindless activism and from being paralysed by fear.

Saint Augustine in his sermon for this feast says, *Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him.* This is the mystery of the church! The church is the body of Christ. And what this feast celebrates is that where the *head* has gone before us in glory, the *body* will follow in hope. Christ ascends to intercede for us with the Father. Christ ascends to prepare a place for us. Christ ascends so that we, in heart and mind, may *also* ascend and with him continually dwell. Amen.