

# Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church

South Hurstville

Preacher

The Reverend Chris Albany

Rector

Ascension Sunday

20 May 2007

Readings: Acts 1.1-11; Psalm 97; Ephesians 1.15-23; Luke 24.44-53

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## Presence and absence – I wish you enough

Our family have never been big on dramatic farewells, but some families seem to love them. When a family member goes overseas it almost seems like an unspoken rule that as many as possible have to turn up at the airport and the same again whenever one of them returns. So whenever I'm at the international airport saying my somewhat sedate farewells I am aware that there seem to be other families doing it in even more dramatic fashion, with floods of tears and endless clinging hugs. One can't help wondering what's behind such displays of emotion. Perhaps in some of them, a young adult who has never left home before is heading off overseas and won't be back for a couple of years at least, with much uncertainty and trepidation for those left behind. In others, perhaps a family unit is emigrating, leaving behind grandparents and siblings and cousins, and contact that has been close and regular will now be reduced to letters and emails and phone calls and a visit every five years or so. In others, it might be the case that people are farewelling a loved one who they know they will never see again. The emotion and tears are understandable, and so are the awful aching feelings of emptiness afterwards, when the parting is complete, the plane has disappeared into the clouds, and there is nothing to do but go home feeling like your heart has been ripped out.

Nathan Nettleton suggests that, "There must have been something of all that in the experience of the disciples when Jesus was carried off into heaven. No matter how much he reassured them about the imminent arrival of the Holy Spirit, or how much he promised that he was only a prayer away, or how clearly he spelled out that he would be with them always, even to the end of the age, it wasn't going to be the same anymore. The Jesus they had known face to face, and walked and talked and ate and laughed with, was not going to be with them that way anymore. I don't blame them for standing there, rooted to the spot, staring dumbly into the sky. What they had so enjoyed was over. They had been almost inseparable for three years, and then he had been taken away and killed, and then everything they had ever known and believed was turned on its head as they got him back again, but now, forty days later, he was gone again. And this time he wasn't just ducking off for the long weekend. This time it was the full flood of tears at the airport, end of an era, nothing to hold on to, parting. And they were left standing there, blinking dumbly into the sky, wondering what on earth to do now."

Such thinking reminds me of the comment of a colleague of mine in Perth about the acclamation in the Eucharistic Thanksgiving prayer saying, "It sounds sometimes as though we are saying "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ has gone on a long holiday!" If that is what we think the event, Luke describes for us in 2 ways in our first and last readings for today, is saying then we have got our understanding of Jesus and our relationship with Jesus all wrong. True there is much of the time when He feels anything but close. There is much of the time when, at best, it feels like an other-side-of-the-world, letters-and-emails kind of relationship. But Easter faith of which the Ascension is an important part is about affirming that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ is with us now."

Nathan Nettleton again helpfully says, "To our minds, absence and presence are opposites. Even with the technological wonders of the internet and video conferencing, absence is absence. No one can be both absent and yet present at the same time. It's impossible. But is anything impossible for God? If the comprehensively dead can be raised and be even more alive than ever before, then maybe absence and presence are not as irreconcilable as we imagine.

He continues, "Indeed, I believe that that is part of the message of the placement of this feast of Ascension. The season of Easter, is not forty days which close with Ascension. It is fifty days with

Ascension as a stage along the way. We are not celebrating forty days of the risen Christ being with us and then he's gone. Instead Ascension is a part of our ongoing celebration of the risen Christ's presence with us.

Rather than taking off for some other place and becoming absent from our place, it is as though Jesus has instead gotten bigger. As one of the Celtic prayers from the Abbey of Iona puts it, Christ has ascended into heaven to be everywhere present. Not to leave us behind as he goes off to enjoy some distant heaven, but to fill the heaven that is all around us, so that as the psalmist put it, whether I fly towards the dawn or plunge down to the depths of the earth, even there I find I am still in God's hands.

Presence and absence, in some strange way they go together for those of us who live between the first Pentecost and Christ's final coming. An absence of the flesh and blood Jesus, not to be known and experienced in space and time as the first disciples experienced him, ours is an experience of a more elusive presence – a hint here a reminder there – in the events and peoples of our lives. But nevertheless tangible and real if we but have the wisdom and grace to discern His compassion and love at work. The moments that we sense His presence may at times be fleeting, scattered but they are real and they sustain us. They are enough. Which brings me to a story told by Bob Perk's with which I wish to finish today. It's entitled "I wish you enough"

He writes. *Recently I overheard a mother and daughter in their last moments together at the airport. They had announced the departure. Standing near the security gate, they hugged and the mother said "I love you and I wish you enough".*

*The daughter replied, "Mom, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Mom". They kissed and the daughter left. The mother walked over to the window where I was seated. Standing there I could see she wanted and needed to cry. I tried not to intrude on her privacy but she welcomed me in by asking "Did you ever say good-bye to someone knowing it would be forever?"*

*"Yes, I have," I replied. "Forgive me for asking but why is this a forever goodbye?". "I am old and she lives so far away. I have challenges ahead and the reality is - the next trip back will be for my funeral" she said. "When you were saying goodbye, I heard you say 'I wish you enough'. May I ask what that means?"*

*She began to smile. "That's a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone". She paused a moment and looked up as if trying to remember it in detail and she smiled even more. "When we said 'I wish you enough' we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them". Then turning toward me she shared the following as if she were reciting it from memory ---*

*I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright.*

*I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more.*

*I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.*

*I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.*

*I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.*

*I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.*

*I wish you enough hellos to get you through the final good-bye.'*

*She then began to cry and walked away.*

To which I would add I wish you enough intimations of the presence of God to sustain you in hope and faith and I wish you enough awareness of God's absence to keep you questioning and searching and growing.

Absence and presence this is the great mystery we celebrate this day. Even when the Christ is killed, yet behold, he lives. And even when he departs, behold he is present with us, stretching his wings still to embrace us all in the glorious love and grace of God. Blessed be Him.

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