

**“The glory that you have given me I have given to them.”**

***Jn 17:22***

On Thursday we celebrated the astonishingly beautiful feast of the Ascension. But what makes it such a wonderful feast? After all, Our Lord disappears from view and He vanishes to somewhere above our heads where we cannot see Him, and where we cannot even imagine what it must be like.

That’s one of the problems with persuading people that Christianity is true, isn’t it? We can’t describe heaven. There are images in the Bible of angels and clouds, but if all we are going to do in heaven is to sit on a cloud and play a harp then no wonder so many people don’t want to know. The reason describing heaven is impossible is because heaven involves a participation in the infinite, a participation in the eternal, a participation in the perfection of holiness, but here on earth we have no real idea what these things involve, so we can’t picture them.

So, what can we say about heaven? We know that heaven is where God is. We know that in heaven we shall be wholly united to God who is perfect truth, and goodness, and beauty. We know that in heaven we shall be like God because we shall see Him as He really is (1 Jn 3:2), not as now, through a piece of smoked glass, as it were, but face to face (1 Cor 13:12). This, in turn, means that we shall see Him in all His glory and splendour and blessedness, and that there will be no imperfections, or pain, or tribulation. In heaven, ‘God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow’ (Apoc 21:4). Even if we can only describe heaven in terms of what it *won’t* be like, surely this helps enormously in our understanding of what it *will* be like.

But there is more that we can say.

God is our Creator. He made us in the first place in order to share with us – so that we could participate in – all the goodness and beauty that is His by right. He was not obliged to create us. He could simply have kept it all for Himself, but that is not God's way. Our God is the God who *gives*. He created us so that, at the end of our natural lives here on earth, we might return home to where He had always intended from the beginning that we would end up. There is a very real sense in which we can say that until we are in heaven, we are not yet fully the person God created us to be. Only in heaven will we become complete, perfected, a finished product we might say.

Here on earth we spend a huge amount of time and effort searching for that completion, that sense of fulfilment, of satisfaction, but, as St Augustine says, 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts shall not rest until they rest in you' (*Confessions*, I i (1) ). In other words, heaven is the place which our hearts are yearning for, even if we don't appreciate that that's what we are looking for so desperately, because heaven is where we are meant to be, where we were always intended by God from the outset to be.

And heaven isn't transitory either: it lasts for ever. Oh, not the sort of boring forever where we end up doing the same thing every single day for millions of years! How dull even the greatest happiness would become in those circumstances! No, heaven is a share in the eternal presence of God; a sort of momentary wonder, and delight, and happiness, that isn't made dull with time because there is no time in heaven. There is only an eternal present which is maintained in all its initial freshness by the presence of the One who Himself is Life and Goodness and Beauty. Whereas even the most beautiful experience on earth could tarnish with time, in heaven it keeps its freshness in the immediacy of God's presence. Nothing can lose its shine, its lustre, in heaven. And that's why we cannot picture heaven: because we have never experienced anything like it on earth.

And this is the place that Our Lord has returned to through His Ascension back to His throne at the Father's right hand. And this is where He has gone to prepare a place for us (Jn 14:3).

Now that Our Lord is ascended back into heaven His work of Atonement is accomplished. However, we must now do our part by co-operating with His grace, praising and worshipping Him with all our hearts, and living a life of virtue in relation to Him and to our neighbour. If we would go to the place that He has prepared for us we must get busy and nurture within our hearts and minds a love of God and of the things of God. But if we do this – if we love the Lord our God with our whole heart, and soul, and mind, and if we love our neighbour as ourselves (Mt 22:37-39) – then we can follow Him where He has lead captivity captive (Ps 67:19; Eph 4:8) and where we can cry with St Paul, 'O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?' (1 Cor 15:55).

*This* is why the feast of the Ascension is so glorious!