

Today we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord into heaven, and the end of his earthly ministry. In some ways it is an end point in the Christian story, Jesus vanishing, closure on that chapter of our evolution, closure on an earthly life, closure on the historical Jesus of the 1st century Holy Land.

I love the fact that so many images of the Ascension simply show Jesus' feet disappearing into a cloud to symbolise this final glimpse as he takes off for another place.

I don't expect anyone to remember but when I did my Easter online service I spoke about light as a sacrament, light as a sign of hope, light as a sign of God's promise and presence in creation. And I talked about the fact that our own material connection to each other as church now is through light, through the pixels of your computer screen, iPad or phone. That is all we have in terms of physical connection: light shining through.

With that in mind I can show you a picture of light shining through a glass screen to illuminate my talk today, and that is of course the medieval version of the iPad, the stained glass window. This depiction of the Ascension is found in the amazingly well-preserved church at Fairford in Gloucestershire, a huge church which has nearly all its medieval stained glass windows completely intact.

This scene shows Jesus' feet disappearing into a cloud as I mentioned, the panel to the right of this photograph. He is standing on a stylised depiction of a mountain, but it almost looks like a kind of catapult launcher firing him off into space. Perhaps it underlines the finality of what has happened, Jesus earthly ministry well and truly over as he is shot up into the clouds.

Certainly that's human nature, to look for closure in a story, to shut the door and to move on. It is no coincidence that I include in my picture of the Ascension the adjacent scene, which shows the Apostles going back to their fishing boats, immediately after the Crucifixion. Dispersed in fear from Jerusalem, they simply returned to carry on business as normal. People do that, even the Apostles who met Jesus personally and were inspired by him stopped going around preaching and spreading the good news and went straight back to their old lives.

And in a way that is where I think we are too now in society as we more or less get ready to end this period of lockdown and return to normal. I am sadly confident that when corona virus is over we will all go back to how we were. Everyone now is happy to say we will never fly again or whatever but in two years' time there's a flight to Spain return for £40... we will return to more or less as we were, that's just human nature.

But as Christians we have another side to our story, that life is not to be lived without meaning, without learning, without growth, without realisation. There is a pattern, indeed a cycle, to Jesus' ministry that speaks not of finality but of growth and learning, getting better, moving forwards in hope.

The very first words that Jesus says in his public ministry, according to Luke's Gospel, come immediately after he has read out part of the Bible, a prophecy from Isaiah. After Jesus has read the prophecy he sits down and says: "Today this scripture has

been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4). That is how he starts his public preaching, with those words.

And here we celebrate the very last seconds of Jesus’ ministry on earth, the very final words that he says at the end of his earthly ministry. And what exactly does he say? He says more or less exactly the same thing: “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” That is the first and last thing that Jesus states.

There is a pattern here, a beginning and an end, but one that points us back to the beginning again. Points us back further and deeper still to the Old Testament.

There are cycles and patterns to life. We all go over old ground, but we as Christians have a special mandate to learn in love and care, to tread more wisely and more carefully, to learn lessons from both the good things and the bad things we encounter.

I want to spare a moment here for our beloved home of Christ Church, whose annual festival it is today, and draw that building in to the closing thoughts of my talk. As you might have been reminded on your daily, state-mandated exercise, we have outside Christ Church a labyrinth, a spiritual walk where you retrace your steps but slightly to the side each time. We learn and we grow. We also know that there is no end but a pattern, a cycle to life. I was reflecting on Alison’s homily from last weekend and she talks about the environment and our love for the planet. We need to grow, to learn, to improve. The labyrinth is an ancient configuration in the landscape, and it is long thought to represent this sort of spiritual reflection on life, the patterns and cycles as we move along over the same path, through the same experiences, but slightly at one remove each time.

So I walked in the holy grounds of Christ Church around our lovingly mown labyrinth and you can come with me now on a very much speeded up journey, if it doesn’t make you too giddy, a film of the short walk through the path. And afterwards we can look up and see the church built in Christ’s name and remember that all the patterns and meanings we might find on the small level, in our small steps, have their ultimate meaning and fulfilment in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not just the fulfilment of stories past, of old prophecies and the hopes of a nomadic nation, a historical figure confined to one space and one time which came to a definitive end. He is a fulfilment of our own stories too. The big stories of the prophets, the small stories of our own lives, all of these find their ultimate fulfilment and meaning in Jesus Christ. The Ascension is not the final end of a story, but part of our ongoing encounter with God.

And in a way these two quotations from Isaiah were not the last words of Jesus Christ in the Bible. In fact if you scroll all the way through to the end of the Bible and the Book of Revelation you will encounter the one seated on the throne in chapter 21, who says very simply this: Behold I make all things new. Today is not the end but the beginning. Behold I make all things new.