ASCENSION THURSDAY 21.5.20

Read: Acts 1:1-11

If we get stuck at what we may find to be the somewhat strange biblical images associated with the Ascension, then this great feast can seem rather meaningless: the scriptures present us (again in scripture-speak, like the reference to '40 days' in yesterday's reflection) with images of Jesus being "lifted up" into the sky, so that "a cloud" takes him from the disciples' sight; Psalm 46 declares "God goes up with shouts of joy; the Lord goes up with trumpet blast". That is all very theatrical, we may say, but where does it get us? So Jesus has 'gone home'; great for him no doubt but why the trumpets?

Why is it such a tremendous occasion for us? One way of looking at the answer is that this is actually the moment when the gate to heaven is at last opened to fallen humanity - and for each of us that is surely an occasion for abundant joy and great celebration. In returning to the Father, following his life, death and resurrection, Jesus in a very real sense takes us with him. Without His Ascension, there is no way to heaven for us.

The further and extraordinary beauty in all this is that in a very real sense Jesus has not gone! Through our ongoing life in the Holy Spirit "Christ while in heaven is also with us", as St Augustine said, "and we while on earth are also with him.....he did not leave heaven when he came down to us from heaven, and he did not leave us when he ascended to heaven again".

This is very relevant to us here and now, faced with all manner of trials and difficulties. Put yourself in the shoes of any one of the disciples: Jesus had been your leader, adviser, teacher, companion, guide, source of your strength, and everything else which has given your life direction and supported you for the past three years. And now he says in as many words, right, I'm off, and I want you to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19) and be my witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Sounds a bit of an uphill task? Yet we know what has happened from that 'impossible' start.

When we feel powerless in the face of overwhelming tasks, the key to finding a way forward is "And know that I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).