

A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they drew pictures. Occasionally, she would walk around the room to see each child's work. "What are you drawing?" she asked one little girl who was working diligently at her desk.

The girl replied, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like."

The little girl replied, "**They will in a minute.**"

The Feast of the Ascension celebrates another one of those events which presents us with an image of God! Of his presence in the world, and his call on us to be witnesses to his presence. But because we celebrate the major feasts of the church with hindsight and developed reflection, we miss the intense emotions that those events caused for the ones who initially experienced them. Immediate experiences are often full of raw emotion that time mitigates. We soften the reality of the initial experience.

The women and men who met with Jesus before his Ascension had, up to this point, never left the tiny land area that made up their own country. Now Jesus orders them to go to the ends of the earth and tell the Good News that the Kingdom of God has broken into human affairs by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The apostles wanted and needed safety. They asked Jesus whether this would not be a good time to restore David's Kingdom, a moment in the history of Israel when the nation seemed in retrospect to be secure. Jesus' reply must have increased their insecurity.

Rather than assuring his disciples of a safe haven in political terms, he challenges them to take enormous risks for him. Nothing here about restoring the kingdom of Israel. Divine protection was to be something other than security. The Spirit was to protect and energize. But these frightened followers of Jesus knew nothing of the power of the Spirit as the Spirit cooperates with Jesus in a "new creation," the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus tells them how much he loves them, and how they should step up to honour his memory – loving him, keeping his commandments and spreading his Gospel to the corners of the earth. And the double whammy! He's leaving them forever, in this life, and then he disappears into the sky!

Incomprehensible!

All of us have experienced death in one form or another. Some of us may even have experienced the traumatic and violent death of someone we love. And in most instances, death itself is upheaval. It often involves being with a loved one during their time of agony, being helpless and powerless to stop the pain and death. The disciples had been through all that with Jesus, but then he reappeared in a real, tangible, physical, touchable, talking flesh and blood way. You can imagine their shock and their confusion, their doubting of their sanity.

To let go of someone we love takes a great deal of courage, self-sacrifice, love. To let go of someone we love requires thinking of the needs of and benefits to the beloved more than to ourselves. In our natural state, we want to hold on, cling tight, never let go. The Ascension is a shocking feast of surrender, of being left behind, of letting the other go where we cannot, to wish the best for another even if it leaves less for oneself. In the course of our lives, we experience this letting go of love in many daily ways. It is allowing the other to be other and to not be for us. It takes a great deal of courage to live Ascension, to risk a new dimension of living, to give up our precious prejudices. Ascension hurts!

Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them, but how could they possibly know what this could mean? They were raw, vulnerable people, still frightened from the horrors of the previous week. This final appearance and then disappearance must have felt like post-traumatic stress, a reliving of the life and death of their hoped-for saviour. And, oh, how alone they must have felt as they saw the clouds part and their beloved Jesus taken into heaven, disappearing from sight. Loneliness is one of the greatest sorrows we experience in life.

Pentecost would change all that, but the disciples weren't there yet. Can you see how we share the disciples' insecurity as we huddle in our little kingdoms we call "churches." We hope and pray that others will join us, people who like the way we do things and will help pay for a new heating system. We hope they will access our website, read the rector's blog, or the advertisement lost among so many others on the church noticeboard, or be attracted by the sign outside the church that tells them that the Anglican Church is here for them. Do we feel compelled to rush us out into the

marketplace to tell the Good News that Jesus transforms and makes all things new? We have a terrible time with the word “evangelism” - the very thought that we have a responsibility to speak about Jesus and his Kingdom scares us to death, or perhaps worse, offends our sensibilities. After all, religion should not be the subject of polite conversation!

The disciples feared being killed: we fear ridicule. So perhaps our prayer should be that God will remove from us our fear of seeming ridiculous and replace that fear with courage to live out our Christmas commission and “Go into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the world” as today’s reading from Acts says. Or shall we sit in our upper room and wait for a kingdom? St. Francis of Assisi said it well: “Proclaim the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

The Ascension is all about God. It is not about gravity, or the physical location of heaven, or any of that. It is about God. In fact, even though it comes toward the end of Eastertide, the Ascension is most closely related, in meaning, to Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate the Incarnation, God becoming flesh and living among us. The divine becomes human. What we say today is that what was begun at Christmas is brought full circle, and proclaimed again in a different way, at the Ascension.

At Christmas, we celebrate God becoming fully a part of what it means to be a human being. In Jesus, the human and the divine become united in the person and life of one man. At the Ascension, this human being - the person and the resurrected body of Jesus - became for all eternity a part of who God is. The life of a single, individual human being is forever joined to the life of God the Father, the one who created the heavens and the earth. It is important to remember that it was not the spirit of Jesus, or the essence of Jesus, or the divine nature of Jesus, or the invisible part of Jesus, or the idea of Jesus, or anything like that, that ascended to the Father. It was the resurrected body of Jesus: a body that the disciples had touched, a body that ate and drank with them, a real, physical, but gloriously restored body-bearing the marks of nails and a spear. This is what ascended. This is what, now and forever, is a living, participating part of God. The Ascension changed who God is.

The Ascension, along with the Incarnation, is here to tell us that it is a good thing to be a human being. It is such an important thing that God did it. Even more, the fullness of God now includes what it means to be a human being. The experience, the reality, and the stuff of being a person is so valuable that God has made it a part of God's life.

The Ascension of the Lord Jesus goes to the very essence of the Christian vocation and the plan of redemption. We have ascended with Jesus Christ and are called to live on earth the very realities of heaven, beginning in the here and now. Heaven, the arena of God and the angels, touches upon and calls out to earth, the arena of humans, animals, plants, and planets. Salvation is a matter of the meeting of heaven and earth, so that God might reign as thoroughly here below as he does on high.

The Ascension of the Lord empowers the Church to fulfil its messianic mission: to gather the nations of the world into a relationship with the God of Israel.

The Apostles were instructed to teach – to proclaim the Good News to the whole world. And they were to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, they were to speak explicitly about the Kingdom of God and about salvation. The Apostles were to give witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. The early Church clearly understood these instructions and the missionary era began, and it's our turn now!

**Kevin DeYoung** writes in his book *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Making sense of social justice, Shalom and the Great Commission)

“The Church acts as a sort of embassy for the government of the King. It is an outpost of the Kingdom of God surrounded by the kingdom of darkness. Just as an embassy is meant to showcase the life of a nation to the surrounding people, so the Church is meant to manifest the life of the Kingdom of God to the people around it.”

Thy Kingdom come! Indeed!