

It has been a whopper of a week for saints. John and Charles Wesley on Tuesday, The Venerable Bede on Wednesday and for all of us, Ascension Day on Thursday- win, win, win.

When the Anglican John Wesley was reprimanded for his charismatic preaching it is reported that his Bishop warned him that 'enthusiasm, Mr Wesley, is a very horrid thing'

When Bede, the monk of Jarrow was dying, on the evening before Ascension Day, in the year 735 he struggled to say the words of the Antiphon for the Magnificat at Evening Prayer 'leave us not comfortless'.

And where do we stand- enthusiastic in our expressing of our faith, or struggling to fit faith into the world we inhabit. Comfortless in a world with Ukraine and Russia at war, with drought and famine raging, a world where 19 children are gunned down at school.

How should we respond to the Ascension of Jesus of Nazareth- a strange image for our worldview.

Remember that the cloud, throughout the scriptures is a visual aid, shorthand, to describe the presence of God. So Jesus ascending into the clouds is less rocket science and more artistic licence, to come to terms with that re-absorption into God at the end of his presence on earth. We can't ever get back into the mind-set of 1stC Jerusalemites, but

hold this idea in your minds, perhaps . Ascension as the re-absorption of the divine.

So are we to mourn the absence of Christ after Ascension Day. We've alleluia-ed the risen Christ, at every opportunity during the last 40 days, in a way which makes the presence of the risen Christ among us liturgically, really strong. Do we now grieve his absence, devoid of incarnate image once again?

In the last few years the Church of England has been encouraged by archbishops, bishops and Church House Publishing, to spend this interlude between Ascension and Pentecost as a Novena, hardly a reformation word, a period of nine days of prayer in which we ask for the Holy Spirit to cheer us, enthuse us and empower us in new ways in a renewing of our individual missional living. Now, of

course, it is good, right and proper, that we follow our Lord's command to witness to our faith and to have confidence in what God has already wrought. But I am substantially less than convinced that Ascensiontide is the right time to be praying about our individual mission which assumes we need to take God into the world. No- For Ascension surely says the **whole** created order is suffused by God already. After all, this is the time that the disciples, the believers, together, were led out to Bethany, they were blessed together, and the Dominical prayer that they might all be one, is particularly profound- remaining one in unity to be inspired by the Spirit in whatever language they understood at Pentecost.

Yes, Ascensiontide is a brief period in the liturgical year, a mere nine days, from Ascension last Thursday to Pentecost next Sunday. But it does seem to me that it is primarily a liminal time, a doorstep time, a time of change and adjustment.

The alleluias cease and the struggle with faith in and for the world begins. We move from resurrection certainty to the Spirit's leading us into all truth, but we know not where that might lead us. These nine days are surely a significant period of waiting- like Advent, like Holy Saturday, a transitional time between promise and fulfilment.

On Thursday, Ascension Day, we read from Luke's Gospel the account of Jesus' s Ascension- that as he blessed his friends he was carried up to heaven....and what did the disciples do then? Did

they slink off back to their nets, hide in the undergrowth, did they dissolve in tears or go their individual way- cheerio old chum, nice knowing you? Far from it, according to Luke's account, they were nudged into worship, thanksgiving, back in the Jerusalem temple, blessing God for what they had experienced. 'Why stand looking up into heaven this Jesus will come in the same way you saw him go'. In worship and pastoral care, in prophetic and practical ministry- healing, feeding, reconciling. And so for us too.

For us, here in this parish, two Spirit filled events, occasions for blessing God together in this place, follow rapidly in this season. On 25<sup>th</sup> June 12 new priests will be ordained here to serve the people of God in word and sacrament across our Episcopal

Area, and then the very next day twenty youngsters and adults will be confirmed , to praise God in the living of their lives , journeying onwards in faith.

This is surely the time, building on the sacrificial love of Christ in Cross and Resurrection, to be led forwards together, as his body in the world today, to work out how we might witness to that self – offering of love, whatever the cost, for us and for the communities we serve- in light of food poverty, homelessness and refugees in our parish, in light of wars and violence reported and unreported ravaging our world, in light of climate change rendering land unworkable for millions. Not because Christ is absent, and we need to work out a plan, but because he is universal, present always

everywhere, when we open our eyes to see, our minds to absorb and our arms to embrace him- which can begin only in worship, enthusiastic like Mr Wesley, or struggling like the Venerable Bede.

As the alterative collect for Ascensontide bids us, so may we live:

Risen Christ, you have raised our human nature to the throne of heaven, help us to seek and serve you.