

Ascension to Pentecost 2



As they were watching... a cloud took Jesus out of their sight. Acts 1.9

Peter Rogers painted this dazzling image of the ascending Christ in 1963. Feet already off the ground and face and arms reaching up, Jesus is enveloped in a whitish-gold cloud which streams downwards to receive him. On the left, the “two men in white” (Acts 1.10) ask the awestruck disciples why they are staring upwards. The flames encircling them speak of the fiery power of God and hint at Pentecost.

Biblical writers often use clouds to symbolise the divine presence. Think of the pillar of cloud guiding the Israelites out of Egypt, or the cloud covering Mt Sinai as Moses speaks with God, or the bright cloud during the Transfiguration from which God speaks to the disciples. This divine presence is one of fathomless mystery and, just like the clouds in our skies, is constantly on the move - sometimes concealing, sometimes revealing, always mesmerising.

In the late 14th century, a mystic from the Midlands encouraged his pupils to run with the cloud metaphor as they tried to pray. Accept that God is fathomless mystery, he said, and enter ‘the cloud of your unknowing’! There, even though you can’t see, you’ll have a better chance of glimpsing God.

What do we make of all this cloud-talk in the context of coronavirus?

That nameless author of ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’ lived in uncertain times. As well as war and social

unrest, he, like us, lived in a time of pandemic. In his youth, the Black Death had raged across England, killing maybe half its people. And it kept coming back.

His response? To long for God. To turn to contemplative prayer in his ‘little soul-room’. To accept the limitations of reason and embrace mystery. To glimpse God lovingly waiting for him in the cloud of his unknowing.

It seems a perfect approach for Ascensiontide. Perhaps for the wider times in which we live too?

“The ascension of Christ tilts the universe for us; it gives us a fresh perspective and meaning for the world.”

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

**Mysterious, waiting God
forgive us when we assume
we can fathom your depths,
and deepen our search for you
in the cloud of unknowing. Amen**