

Ascension to Pentecost 3



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

Richard Bartlett (USPG)

Prayer

Ascended Lord,
from enforced absence
help us to learn
the lessons of love.

Amen

“Jesus withdrew from them...” Luke 24.51

This face is a detail from an exquisite image of the Ascension painted in mediaeval Florence, c1340. It is one of many upturned faces gazing helplessly as the beloved one leaves.

This is Mary’s face, a mother’s face as she loses her child. It is the second time that this Mater Dolorosa, this Mother of Sorrows, has stood underneath her son, watching and waiting and weeping. After the mad joy of the resurrection, the thrill of experiencing her son alive again, this is a second bereavement. Another parting. Her sorrow is quiet and there is resignation here but the nameless painter also reveals the unmistakable pain of this fresh separation.

What do we see as we gaze at Mary’s face in the context of coronavirus?

We may be reminded of the enforced separation from family, experienced by many during the lockdown of recent weeks. Mary’s physical presence with her son may stir our compassion for those parents who could *not* watch and wait and weep by the hospital bedsides of their children. Her loss twice-lived may bring to mind stories of joyous recovery from COVID-19 followed shockingly a little later by a more severe return of the illness and a permanent parting.

As it has reflected upon its meaning, Ascension has become a great feast day of the Church though our current context helps us see that celebration was probably not uppermost in the minds of those who saw Jesus go. Perhaps, however, you will appreciate these insights from Barbara Brown Taylor, musing on the Ascension: *“Sometimes I think that absence is under-rated. It is not nothing, after all. It is something: a heightened awareness, a sharpened appetite, a finer perception. When someone important to me is absent from me, I become clearer what that person means to me. Details lost in our togetherness are recalled in our apartness: their sudden clarity has the power to prise my heart right open.”*

How might the perspective offered by absence affect your relationships when together again?