

ASCENSION OF THE LORD - 1 June 2014

PRESENT BUT NO LONGER VISIBLE

According to the accounts in the writings known to us as the New Testament the men and women who had lived and worked with Jesus prior to his execution at Calvary met, talked and ate with him after his death. Sceptics treat the accounts with some disdain as self-justifying accounts to get the Church enterprise under way. St Thomas in his famous declaration about not believing what the others told him unless he could examine the wounds in the body of Jesus made by the nails and the spear needed tangible evidence that were not sharing some mass hallucination born of grief and a desire that Jesus was still alive somewhere. I can be as sceptical as the next, but I have never been able to buy the idea that these men and women would concoct a story which would result in their being tortured and even killed. These men and women experienced something so overwhelming that they changed. Their explanation of what brought about the change was that Jesus whom they had seen executed by crucifixion returned to life. He returned not as a ghost nor in a revival mode. He was alive in a way different to how they had experienced him before Calvary. But Jesus lived.

Risen from the dead he spent time with his friends. Luke portrays him teaching and completing the formation he began before his death. But there came a time when he withdrew from their sight and was seen no more. Christian art abounds with representations born of the accounts in the New Testament with Jesus being lifted up from the earth and disappearing into the sky. The essence of the accounts is that the disciples no longer saw him and ate with him and talked with him. But while he was gone in one way, he was present to them in a new way. The disciples sensed his presence in the spirit that now animated them. The coming of the spirit we celebrate next Sunday with Pentecost.

Today with the solemnity of the Ascension we mark the time when his way of being present changed. As he promised we were not left like orphans without home and security from those who love us. No longer bound by the laws of physics, He is with us in a remarkably new way. As we go about our daily tasks we look for the signs of his presence in unexpected words we say and hear. In gestures and thoughts, we know and experience the presence of one we can no longer see but whom we shall see again in the fullness of time.

Fr Adrian Farrelly