

And they were continually in the temple blessing God.

+ Every Ascension day, when my mind should probably literally be on higher things, I can't help thinking of a story that one of my friends told me at Westcott, where Father Stephen and I spent a happy year together in the balmy days of our youth.

Another colleague of ours, before he had pursued his priestly vocation had been a choral scholar at Durham cathedral, a period of his life, it has to be said, that was not marked by the rigours of academic study. Instead, he passed his time engaged in various more fruitful pursuits, one of which was serving as the Student Magazine's wine correspondent. And so it was that one

fateful Ascension day he had spent the afternoon reviewing Waitrose Wines for under a fiver (which gives you some indication of when this story dates from) and rather surprised his fellow choirmen by turning up red-cheeked and slurring for the Evensong rehearsal.

Eventually he managed to fumble himself into his cassock and toddled off into his place in choir, gently swaying at his stall, just in time for the beginning of the rehearsal of that great Ascension Day piece, *God is Gone up* by Gerald Finzi, which – as many of you know – begins with this trumpet-like acclamation of Christ's rising into heaven. *God is gone up*, he sung, so far so

good, *with a triumphant Shooouutt*. As if Jesus had shot up maybe 30 metres or so, and then like an untied balloon slowly and messily drifted back down again to the ground.

Musically, his ascension day fell a bit flat, and there's always a danger that our theology of the Ascension of Christ can be a bit of a damp squib as well. So often we can see it just as order being restored, Jesus goes back where he belongs, or as a weird low key prelude to the main event of Pentecost with its tongues of flame and many languages – all much more exciting.

But St Luke, at least, who we have heard from twice today, doesn't seem to regard the Ascension as such a second rate event. For Luke chooses to make the Ascension the great hinge of his two-volume work: it serves as the climactic ending of his Gospel of the story of Christ's life among us, and is the springboard right at the start of Acts, the story of the beginning of the Church.

It would have been so easy for Luke to end his gospel elsewhere – maybe with the moving resurrection appearance at Emmaus; or to begin Acts with the drama of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church – and

yet he chooses this strange feast that many Christians don't really know what to do with.

And the reason why, I think, can be seen when we recognise that the Ascension isn't just a moment when order is restored, and things have come full circle, and we are back to where we began: but the Ascension is a time of radical, almost shocking newness: the when for the first time ever, in the whole of the history of creation, a human being enters heaven.

It is a day that opens up a whole new horizon of possibility for human life and human destiny, beyond anything we could possibly have imagined. It opens the

door to the idea – absolutely unthinkable to the ancient Israelites – that each human being might be able not only to look upon God and live but to live with him in heaven forever.

And the magnitude of these new possibilities, the scale of this new hope requires a different kind of response: a response symbolised by the action of the disciples when Christ ascends: they look up.

Indeed, Ascension could almost be the Feast of looking upwards. Compare Pentecost a little later in Acts, which is so much an occasion of action, tongues of flame, speeches, preaching, conversion, baptisms,

signs and wonders, sharing possessions, praise: the business of the Church – even the busyness of the Church—in the life of the Spirit.

But Ascension is simply about looking up – looking up in wonder at possibilities that we hadn't anticipated, at a hope we could not have dreamed, and at a life that is just so much larger and fuller than we could have expected. Luke wanted the story of the Church to begin not in action, but in contemplation, not in miraculous achievement, but in astonishment.

And so in a way Ascension is a feast for our time, because in a world so relentlessly focussed on action,

on outcomes, on results, on getting your eyes down and working away, on distractions and entertainments that block out the dangerous sound of silence, we need to be reminded that all authentic Christianity, and all responsible living, begins not with acting out, but with looking up.

And in his Gospel Luke reminds us of the one place where that kind of contemplation is at home, that kind of stillness, that kind of openness to go beyond what we comprehend and can manage in the present, when he says:

*And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*

Because of all human acts, of all human gatherings, it is worship most of all that invites us to look up. To pause from what we think we know, and join with others in being open to a mystery beyond our understanding, and a hope beyond our planning and our abilities. *Look up*, Christ's Ascension invites us--*Look up*, our Ascension Day worship reminds us, *and see that God is gone up with a triumphant shout! Amen.*