

Stewardship Sunday 3/4 – Theme: Worship

Address by Fr Jeremy Davies, at the Solemn Eucharist

This is the Sunday when we are reminded that it is okay to raise our eyes to heaven. We are encouraged to look up with the disciples as Jesus was removed for their sight up into heaven.

Looking up requires effort. Gravity is always pulling us back down. As I walk through Kings Cross station I see a hundred pair of eyes straining up at the departure boards. At the pub I saw dozens of heads looking up at TV screens watching the Cup Final - though if you were a Chelsea fan, I expect you spent more time looking down! At a fireworks display our necks are craned upwards anticipating the next colourful explosion. Look down for a couple of seconds and you might miss it.

Then there's the theatre and concert hall. Up on the stage are the performers entertaining us, drawing us into their performance. Lights... music... words... all designed to lift us out of ourselves. And here we cross from the physical to the metaphorical. We "look up" to those we admire, the "look up" in a dictionary a word we don't understand, we "look up" a friend we haven't seen in a while.

How terrible it was to see the pictures of that terror attack on Monday. A concert hall filled with happy, mostly young, people looking up, in both senses, at a young woman singing her heart out for them, who was lifting their hearts in enjoyment of life - then within minutes a rapid descent into chaos and death. An explosion, not of celebratory fireworks, but of a bomb filled with nuts and bolts intended to kill and injure as many as possible. From looking upwards, eyes were looking down on death and destruction.

"What goes up, must come down", so we say. It's not just gravity that teaches us that. Human behaviour does too. Like those fireworks, the enjoyment is fleeting. In the end we all descend. We are but dust and to dust we will eventually return.

So dare we raise our eyes when life seems so ultimately pointless? Well, yes we can - and do. One of the beautiful moments the following evening during the vigil in central Manchester was when someone started singing spontaneously after the minute's silence - "Don't look back in anger, I heard you say," words by a local rock band, Oasis. In an instant music cut through the sadness, it brought people together and lifted the spirits of everyone there.

When Rupert and his amazing choir sing motets and anthems and beautiful Mass settings on our behalf they in a sense are imitating what happened in that crowd on Tuesday evening. Yes, of course, they are better rehearsed, yes, they are singing what we regard as more elevated music (notice again that "rising" metaphor) and yes, we can't exactly join in - but the impetus is the same, the same spirit lifting us up out of ourselves, drawing us closer together.

Yet what makes our singing, both choral and congregational different, however, is that we are singing within this beautiful church and within the context of a liturgy in which we are both celebrating and indeed enacting what we believe, that Christ rose from the dead, that he is ascended to His Father's right hand and now reigns forever as King of the Universe. And, that is more, we celebrate our faith that where he has gone he has promised we shall follow. We use metaphorical language in our celebration because that is what we know and understand best. How else can we speak of timelessness and eternity?

There is a wonderful moment that best expresses the Ascension in the Mass. It is that moment at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer when the celebrant takes hold of the pattern containing the Host and the chalice now filled with the Precious Blood and lifts them up saying "... through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory be yours, almighty Father... for ever and ever." And we respond "AMEN." That is the most important word you say in all the Mass. In that one word, Amen, you express your faith in Christ, risen, ascended, glorified and here present on this altar in this dramatic moment in time. Christ has not abandoned us, he is keeping his promise, he *is* with us until the end of time (Matthew 28: 20 [the final words in Matthew's gospel]). Salvation really is ours, the Good News *really is* Good News!

So here we are with our head in the clouds and feet on the ground. "Holy, holy, holy Lord" our choir will soon sing, the song of the angels in heaven (Isaiah 6:3) - you see, choir, you really are angels! As our choir sing today, pray for the people of Manchester, the people of Syria, the people of Libya, the people of all war torn regions of our world, all those who live with their eyes downcast today.

And finally, let us be renewed in our great Amen to Christ risen, ascended and glorified. Let our Amen in this Mass resonate beyond our ancient walls, and become be heard in every word we utter this coming week and every action we take. May our very lives become an Amen to God, an offering to the Father, through his Risen and Ascended Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen!