

# What does Ascension Day tell us about love?

*Revd Mary Bide, Sub-Dean, May 2022*

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Think back over the past two years, or maybe even the past week, and there will have been times when you have felt happy, times when you were cross, confused, angry, lonely, excited, content. We don't drift along on an even keel, life has its ups and downs, and sometimes there is more up than down, and sometimes it's tough and you just have to hang in there.

Magnify those ups and downs and that's what the disciples had been experiencing. It must have been really exciting being part of the group that followed Jesus, sharing the adulation as he healed and preached. Absolutely terrifying when he was arrested and killed. Desolate until they saw him risen. And then, he just disappears, ascends into heaven, and for a second time they are confused, feeling abandoned, excited, a whole range of feelings. And then joy.

Because this is a pivotal moment for them, when finally they begin to understand what it is all about and start to become ready to receive the Holy Spirit. And maybe they could only come to that realisation when they felt his absence. Realised that Jesus and God are so close that we can use the words almost interchangeably.

Now my guess is that quite a few of you are not here because you really want to come to a service, and probably quite a large number of you would say that you don't believe in God. But I'm willing to bet that you do recognise love when you encounter it. When you are feeling nervous and alone and walk into a room where everyone is in groups and someone notices and reaches out to you. When you are sad and someone is there for you. We instinctively respond to love and kindness.

It was St John who wrote that God is love. And the disciples, when Jesus disappeared from their sight and left them alone, finally realised that this was what Jesus had come to teach them. He had come to teach them the way of kindness, of caring, of putting yourself out for other people, in other words, the way of love. They could think about all those

conversations they had had with Jesus, and finally make sense of them. They could read and listen to the scriptures in a new light. When they heard again the stories of Moses or Elijah it wasn't just history with a hint of magic, these stories were about God's love for creation.

Then as now there was poverty, children going hungry, there was cruelty and war. What they learnt was that things had to change. So they looked after one another, shared, and taught that caring was the way of God. They managed to change things from the bottom up.

In the world today we have frightening loss of biodiversity, the threat of huge areas becoming desert, but leaving aside global crises, in this country, we have more and more people relying on food banks, children going to school without warm clothes or sufficient food. We have racism, and trolling. And the truth is that we can only fix any of this if we learn to care, learn to love. Learn to make sacrifices, to go without for the sake of others, for the sake of this world.

That's what we pray when we say the lord's prayer: thy kingdom come, thy will be done. Not everyone will call God, God. Not everyone will want to call themselves a follower of Jesus. But pretty much everyone recognises love when they see it. And anyone who reads the gospels with an open mind will be able to see that this was the message, the whole point.

There is a story in the bible about a woman who was so bent over she couldn't straighten up at all. Imagine, being only able to see your feet, unable to look at anyone or see the sky. She was healed in a synagogue on the Sabbath and Jesus got a lot of stick for this. But this story is a parable too. We, as individuals and as institutions, become so preoccupied with ourselves that we don't see anything else. It is as though we are bent double. Disabled. But when we care about others, about the world, about people, about nature, we are freed from this disability. Learning to care sets us free.

Ascension Day was for the disciples their pivotal moment, when they understood. At Pentecost they were equipped for the work they had to do. We are at a pivotal moment, a tipping point for the world. We are not yet equipped to do the work needed, but can we look up from our bent position and see what needs to be done. And if we care, really care, we will be equipped and we will make a difference. Amen.