ASCENSION AND MISSION

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> *After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. â€œMen of Galilee,â€ they said, â€œwhy are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!" (Luke 2:9-11 NLT)*

Ascension day sort of sneaks up on us in Britain these days. Gone are the days when schools were given a day's holiday to celebrate the ascension, which is in danger of becoming a forgotten feast in the Christian calendar. However, although we don't talk very much about the ascension these days, it is of crucial importance in Christian mission.

Jesus ascended: the Spirit came. There is no doubt that the risen Jesus would have made an extremely impressive missionary. But the self-imposed limits of a human body, albeit a resurrection body, would have meant that he could only address a limited number of people at a time. Through the ascension and the coming of the Spirit, Jesus equipped his church to be a worldwide body of people all able to give witness to his life, death and resurrection.

Jesus loves his Church and shares with it. When he left the earth, Jesus passed the baton for sharing the good news over to his disciples. It isn't that Jesus needs us, he could have given the job of world mission to a troop of angels, but he didn't. He loves his church and wants to share this precious and fulfilling responsibility with them. He also knew that if he had hung around on the earth, the disciples would have looked to him to do everything and would never have taken up the responsibility he was giving to them.

Jesus is with us. There is a paradox in the ascension. Jesus is no longer on the plant, physically present with us, but seated with the Father, he is accessible to us through prayer. In Matthew 28 he promised to be with us even to the end of the age, and by leaving us he was able to be with us.

He ascended, he didn't vanish. Jesus ascended in a human body and will return in the same way. He didn't become a disembodied spirit floating around or sitting on clouds playing the harp. Jesus still has a human body, albeit a radically renewed one. The Gospel isn't all about getting saved so that they can be transformed and go to heaven. It is about helping people to be the people that God wants them to be and to see the Kingdom of God worked out in time and eternity.