



Ascension Day
2 June 2011

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A sermon by The Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams,
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Readings: Acts 1.6-11; Luke 24.44-53

Plenty of people look around and say, 'This is a world without God'. It's a world where, moment by moment, children are dying in poverty of preventable diseases, tyrants are planning to secure their power over suffering populations, where men and women are struggling to put their lives back together in the wake of natural disaster and where people are dying in loneliness and living in anxiety all around us. Any Christian with a shred of intelligence will surely understand why so many are driven to say, 'Well, it *feels* like a world without God' – and perhaps in secret they agree that, for quite a lot of the time, that is indeed how it feels for them too.

And today, Ascension Day, the friends of Jesus face the fact that they are going to have to get used to living in a world without Jesus – or at least, living in a world without the Jesus they have known. After these frightening and exhilarating few weeks of Easter, when – amazed and confused – they have almost got used to the possibility of meeting Jesus in unexpected faces and places, he is now saying to them, 'It's going to be different. Don't expect to see me around in the old way.' They must have felt deeply disoriented, even fearful.

According to St John's gospel, he'd already said to them, 'It's better for you if I go away.' What kind of sense does *that* make, though? In what way can it be better for us to live in a world from which the visible signs of God's love seem to be absent? Not only the signs of love or joy that might persuade us to believe, but the greatest sign of all, the actual presence of Jesus, risen from the dead in his flesh and blood? If Jesus' friends are feeling apprehensive at the thought of his going away, we can identify with that, because we know what it's like to live in a world where it so often looks as if God has withdrawn and left us to it.

But there are two all-important things that completely change our perspective on this. The first is a theme that St John's gospel in particular is keen to underline. We are always liable to hang on to what we can see and understand so as to make ourselves feel safe; when Jesus is simply 'there' like the other things we find in the world, part of the furniture, there's a big risk that we can make him too familiar. We domesticate him and lose the possibility of being shocked and surprised by him. We don't grasp the fact that he isn't just one thing among others, one person among others. We miss out on the great truth that he is within and beyond all things, mysteriously holding everything together.

So if the world often feels like a world without God, is that a sort of caution to us? Be careful not to think that God is there to fill the gaps, to solve the problems, to fit in in our terms. God isn't a thing among other things. God is the depth of energy out of which every single thing comes. If we can't instantly 'see' God in the world, perhaps it's because he is like the air we breathe, so all-pervasive that we can never pin its presence down as if it were an object.

Well yes; that's all very well, but it sounds a bit chilly, doesn't it? So it does – if we ignore the other big thing we need to remember. Jesus goes away – but he promises that he will fill his friends with his Spirit, he will make them breathe the same air he breathes, as we might put it. Whatever we may be feeling from moment to moment, we've been given a relationship with Jesus that doesn't depend on being able to see him and speak with him in the way his friends could during his earthly

life and immediately after his resurrection. And this relation means that we are able to turn in complete trust to God as father in the way Jesus did, and also to respond to the apparently God-less world with something of his compassion and his transfiguring energy.

Jesus hasn't just gone away. He has gone deeper into the heart of reality – our reality and God's. He has become far more than a visible friend and companion; he has shown himself to be the very centre of our life, the source of our loving energy in the world and the source of our prayerful, trustful waiting on God. He has made us able to be a new kind of human being, silently and patiently trusting God as a loving parent, actively and hopefully at work to make a difference in the world, the kind of difference love makes.

So if the world looks and feels like a world without God, the Christian doesn't try and say, 'It's not as bad as all that', or seek to point to clear signs of God's presence that make everything all right. He or she will acknowledge that the situation is harsh and apparently unhelpful – but will dare to say that they are willing to bring hope by what they offer in terms of compassion and service. And their own willingness and capacity for this is nourished by the prayer that the Spirit of Jesus has made possible for them.

The friends of Jesus are called, in other words, to offer *themselves* as signs of God in the world – to live in such a way that the underlying all-pervading energy of God begins to come through them and make a difference. If we are challenged as to where God is in the world, our answer must be to ask ourselves how we can live, pray and act so as to bring to light the energy at the heart of all things – to bring the face of Jesus to life in our faces, and to do this by turning again and again to the deep well of trust and prayer that the Spirit opens for us.

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