

'The Forgotten Festival' 17 May 2026

'And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'" (Acts 1:9-11)

It is 'The Sunday after Ascension' today. I always feel this sounds like an anti-climax and in many ways it is. Ascension Day itself is arguably the least remembered of the major festivals in the church calendar. I'm not quite sure why this is. Perhaps it is because it lacks formality of opening the church's year on Advent Sunday, or because it is down to being stuck on a Thursday rather than a Sunday, when more parishioners habitually come to worship.

When we come to think of the major festivals marking the time of Christ's presence with us, it seems to be the least remembered. Everybody, even non-believers celebrate Christmas at some level. Churchgoers recall the revelation of this saviour to the Gentiles at Epiphany. Then there is the life of Christ himself, along with his death by crucifixion and the subsequent resurrection from the dead. Ascension doesn't seem to match the drama of Good Friday, or the sheer joy out of sadness of Easter Day, nor the excitement of the receiving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

And yet, Ascension Day is at least as important as any of these, as it is the completion of a great work of God. Jesus, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the co-creator of the world and all that is in it, returns from whence he came to complete the cycle of the hope of the world, leading to our redemption and the renewing of the relationship with a God with whom we had lost touch. The Ascension opens the prospect of our own resurrection, when we can truly follow Jesus into heaven after he returns in glory to judge the earth and most particularly the souls of the people on it. Without the Ascension, where are we to go?

Maybe Ascension is the forgotten festival, because, generally we no longer read the book of Revelation very much anymore. We should, it is a little glimpse of the heaven to which we can look forward.