

IN ORDER TO BRING US TO GOD

Genesis 9. 8-17

1 Peter 3. 18-22

Mark 1. 9-15

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Saint Augustine put it memorably: ‘Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee’ (that is, in God). I doubt that I need to prove to you that there is something restless about us, something deep within us that is never satisfied. It is the obvious thing about us humans, and with just a few minutes of self-reflection we each could fill in the blanks for ourselves personally. Our hearts are restless, because we always find that we need... a bit more time; another piece of clothing; a laptop or an smartphone that is a bit thinner and sleeker than the one we have; or even a body that is thinner and sleeker than the one we have. We invest ourselves in our work, and then we find ourselves longing for the friendships we didn’t take the time to develop. Or we do develop those friendships, and we find our friends move away, or move on, or (in the extreme) just die on us. Yes, our longings, as varied and different as they can be, seem never to be satisfied.

Why is it that nothing can satisfy the longings we have? Again, I doubt that I need to prove to you the diagnosis given by Christianity: we have unfulfilled longings because we have erred and strayed from the right Way. We once had it all: a good climate, abundant produce, obedient animals who all listened to our voice, and delightful human companionship. And then we lost it. We messed up big time; we got lost; and we can’t find our way back.

And what did God do about this? Again, I doubt that I need to tell you that he decided not to leave us to our lostness, but sent his Son Jesus to save us from our

sins. Our Lord saved us by being completely obedient to his Father. In freedom, he embraced the cross and died for us, ‘the righteous for the unrighteous’ as today’s appointed epistle has it; he died for us so that we would no longer have restless hearts, but could be at peace and become fulfilled and truly happy human beings.

Our passage from 1 Peter expresses this blessed state of salvation in one short phrase: Christ died in order to ‘bring us to God’. But here’s my question for you. What does it mean to be brought to God?

For it cannot be a matter of locomotion. We don’t get to God by, say, taking the Condor *Rapide* ferry to St Malo; nor by getting to the right terminal at Gatwick airport. God is not ‘out there’. Nor do we get to God by looking into our hearts, as if there were a little bit of God somewhere inside us (not exactly inside our left ventricle, but perhaps inside our thoughts or at the root of our feelings). No, God isn’t there either.

Jesus died to bring us to God, but where’s that? Our Lord isn’t going to take us ‘out there’, and he isn’t going to take us ‘in here’ (into our hearts).

So where is God? Heaven, we may say, is where God is. But heaven is no place inside you and no place outside you.

The first epistle of St Peter states that Christ died in order to bring us to God. And then the epistle gives us, as it were, the roadmap for that journey; the journey to heaven, the place where God is. It says that Jesus Christ ‘has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him’. To be brought to God, then, is to hang onto our Lord and go with him into a new reality.

This new reality is a transformed world where everything is subject to Christ: angels, authorities, powers, everything. That's not this world as it is, but neither is it an escape from this world: it is this world, *transformed*.

That future world, that kingdom of heaven; that place where our sins are taken away and where we are no longer restless and fruitless and unsatisfied; that future world was already present to us when Jesus lived amongst us. He said (and it is the first thing he says to any human being in St Mark's gospel), 'the kingdom of God has come near'.

And in the lead-up to our Lord saying this, Mark has quickly sketched an outline of the kingdom. First, when Jesus is baptised, the Father speaks from heaven, declaring him to be his Son and that he is pleased in him. Then the Spirit drives him into the wilderness for forty days. There the devil knows who Christ is, and tries to divert him from being true to his mission. There the angels, who also know who Jesus is, help him be true to his mission by ministering to his needs. And Mark then tells us that our Lord was 'with the wild beasts' who none the less do not harm him (a fascinating detail, that: put Christ into the picture and nature is transformed to a peaceful state). From animals to angels to the Father and the Spirit, Jesus is recognised as the presence of the kingdom. And the devil has no power to do anything about it.

Repent, our Lord said; 'the kingdom of God has come near'. It seems to me (and I wonder if you agree) that what we human beings *really want* is to go home to God. There is something about us that only God can satisfy. And that means that there is a fantastic journey in front of us. It is a journey neither in this world nor out of it, but a journey in which this world will be transformed into a new place where everything acknowledges the authority of Christ. This journey is on the other side of our death; and it is a journey we will take with Jesus, who has gone before us.

But do not think of it as a journey that's after death, in the way that Wednesday is after Tuesday. It is a journey that begins *right now*. We must repent of our sins. We must weep. We must feel the pain of the world. None of that is to be lost, or escaped from; in fact, it is all necessary. Yes, we must die, just as a seed planted must die in order to grow anew. Out of this old creation, when it has died, will come forth a new world, a new 'place' if you will, a place where human beings will live in perfect communications with each other, with the cosmos and with God. Our Lord has gone there; has gone into that future world; quite literally to create a place for us. And when the time comes, he will return and take us there.

Christ will take anyone who wants to join him on this fantastic journey into the being of God. It begins with ordinary repentance, which is sometimes painful and always humbling. But my, what an ascension lies before us!

Amen.