Dear Friends,

I hope that this letter finds you well, looking forward to the further loosening of restrictions on the Lockdown and able to enjoy the warm summer weather we have been receiving.

Earlier this week, I spoke with Ian’s wife, Jenny. She has asked me to thank you all for the support received and the floral tribute. I have attached a photograph (date error notwithstanding) of the headstone design that has been ordered for the grave.

Although I have not recently visited the chapel, I am reliably informed by Sharon that all is well maintained, the paint work has been touched up and Andy continues to check the building each Wednesday. The garden continues to receive regular attention, grass cut and rubbish removed. Work to the roof is now likely to commence in June or thereafter.

Last Sunday was Ascension Sunday as described in the Acts of the Apostles. So, I begin with a reflection on that event and how we might see it today; before addressing this Sunday’s theme being Whitsuntide or Pentecost Sunday.

My best wishes as always,

Bob

**The Ascension**

An apocryphal story is a story that probably did not happen. At the same time, an apocryphal story may tell us a ‘truth’ about the subject of that story. When I was in the Royal Navy, I heard the story of a steward who whilst waiting on officers, called out, ‘Hands up those who want soup!’ I heard this story so many times it felt like it had happened on every ship in the fleet. Perhaps it really did happen. Another story that began to do the rounds in the navy of the 1970s was of a rating who was brought before the captain on a disciplinary charge. At some point in the proceedings, the accused put his hand in his pocket, pulled out his ID card and in imitation of using a radio, put it to his ear and said, ‘Beam me up Scotty’. I heard this story a few times, always with a strong assurance that it was true. That particular line, ‘Beam me up Scotty’, from the Star Trek science fiction TV series does not exist. We might think it does, but it doesn’t; its’ apocryphal.

Each year, the Church celebrates Ascension Sunday as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. One cannot help feeling that this is another apocryphal, ‘Beam me up Scotty’ story. According to Acts while Jesus was still with the disciples, on Mount Olivet, forty days after the resurrection, ‘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 the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’   Acts 2:10-11 (RSV)*

What are we to make of this? If a number of church goers were to stand on a hill watching their minister or spiritual leader disappear *up* in a cloud, they would be looking up into the sky or as Acts would have it: ‘gazing into heaven’. The inference is very clear, Jesus’ disciples were indeed looking up into the sky where heaven is; apparently. In the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus said:

*Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:21) (KJV)*

*Nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you (Luke 17:21) (RSV)*

The kingdom of God within, or kingdom of heaven within, is often interpreted as being a state of mind - a state of inner peace. Furthermore, the kingdom of God may be found in relationship between ourselves and others. That is, the kingdom is in ‘our midst’; or that it is ‘amongst us’. Paul, in his letter to the Romans makes this clear

*For the kingdom of God is not food and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17) (RSV)*

Over the years it appears that the celebration of Ascension Sunday has been quietly dropped in many churches, though in the past, on that day, some churches would haul a statue of Jesus up through the ceiling of the church until it disappeared from view. This would obviously make an impression on the congregation!

However, Luke who is the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, from which the story of The Ascension comes, is not a reliable witness to any of the events he wrote about. He simply wasn’t there. Nevertheless, Luke has no difficulty in relating the story of Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus or of how Jesus ‘appeared’ amongst the eleven disciples on that same night, ate fish, and encouraged them to check to look at his hands and feet and to touch him as proof  that he was physically present.

*See my hands and feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; ‘for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have’ (Luke 24:39)*

The problem we have with this story, apart from the notion of a physical resurrection is how a solid physical body can ascend in a cloud without the benefits of modern science or ‘Beam me up Scotty’ Star Trek technology. We are hardly likely to be convinced by the spectacle of a statue being hauled up through a church roof, no matter how ‘symbolic’ this is meant to be. In the rational mindset, we no longer live in a world where we are the centre of all creation, where God in heaven looks down upon us through the clouds, where miracles and magic are an accepted part of life:

*When we find that there is no one ‘out there’, then we are left with our knowledge and our culture which become an end in themselves, and are therefore meaningless, since meaning can only exist in relation to something or someone else. When this Titan has succeeded in overthrowing the gods, he has no meaningful task left and so he must despair. (Machovec 1967).*

 Alternatively, the spiritual seeker may see that despair is merely a vacuum waiting to be filled. The apocryphal story succeeds because it has currency, the story is passed around because at some level it is true or perhaps there is just a longing for it to be true. The story of The Ascension addresses that longing. If like Joseph in the court of pharaoh we could only get past the dream and interpret the message.

William Barclay in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke took the view that Luke’s description of the Ascension was an attempt to put the indescribable into words. When the indescribable is put into words we get a story. Sometimes a story can become scripture, even poetic scripture. That indescribable story of creation as related in Genesis, stirs the imagination, coming to us in images that can be visualised and grasped in one way or another. We may ask why there should be any creation at all. We could say that it’s all meaningless and that indeed there’s no one ‘out there’. But if we were to say in modern parlance, that the DNA of the Universe actually runs through our very being then, we may sense the creative impulse that became the story of creation. Thomas Merton put it like this:

*But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things; or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.*

*(New Seeds of Contemplation)*

The story the ascension really underlines the spiritual nature of our being. Again, in his commentary on the Ascension, William Barclay wrote:

*There had to come a dividing when the Jesus of Earth had to become the Christ of Heaven. (The Daily Study Bible)*

One day, each of us must leave this earth. There has to be a dividing. In the life of Jesus, we have been given an example, an alternative to despair, an example of the faith that can move mountains, faith instead of despair, the ‘joy of the cosmic dance’ of which we are a part and an assurance of the eternal, as portrayed in the story of the Ascension.

***Pentecost***

***Acts 2: 1-18***

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.*

As we ponder the mystery of the Holy Spirit, the second reading I would like to offer you, is taken from Living Buddha, Living Christ by the revered Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

***Mindfulness is the Buddha***

*The Buddha was a human being who was awakened and, thereby no longer bound by the many afflictions of life. But when some Buddhists say that they believe in the Buddha, they are expressing their faith in the wonderful, universal Buddhas, not in the teaching or the life of the historical Buddha. They believe in the Buddha's magnificence and feel that is enough. But the examples of the actual lives of the Buddha and of Jesus are most important, because as human beings, they lived in ways that we can live too.*

*When we read, "The heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove," we can see that Jesus Christ was already enlightened. He was in touch with the reality of life, the source of mindfulness, wisdom, and understanding within Him, and this made Him different from other human beings. When He was born into a carpenter's family, He was the Son of Man. When he opened His heart, the door of Heaven was opened to Him. The Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and He was manifested as the Son of God - very holy very deep, and very great. But the Holy Spirit is not just for Jesus alone; it is for all of us. From a Buddhist perspective, who is not the son or daughter of God? Sitting beneath the Bodhi tree, many wonderful, holy seeds within the Buddha blossomed forth. He was human, but at the same time, he became an expression of the highest spirit of humanity. When we are in touch with the highest spirit in ourselves, we too are a Buddha filled with the Holy Spirit, and we become very tolerant, very open, very deep and very understanding.*

**The Church and the Holy Spirit**

The day of Pentecost, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, depicts a significant and inspirational moment in the early beginnings of the foundation of the Church. Following the Ascension, the disciples, in the upstairs room of a house in Jerusalem, received the Holy Spirit

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. (Acts 2:2-3\_*

The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and changed them forever. They burned with courage and a new determination to spread the news of Jesus’ message. But we cannot limit the Holy Spirit only from the time of Pentecost. In fact, the Holy Spirit was there from the very beginning of creation. For any great task, there is always that one precondition: the energy of the Spirit, that driving force which creates and inhabits the universe.

In the book of Genesis at the creation of the world the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is there and so we read:

*The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep and the Spirit of God was moving on the face of the waters.*

And so, God spoke and creation began. Following Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and a voice was said to come from heaven and was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" and again, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness in preparation for his ministry. Following his time in the wilderness Jesus returned to Nazareth, 'in the power of the Spirit' where he declared:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18*)

And here we have the crux of the message, the good news is for the poor as Jesus said:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)*

The good news is really there for us, for we are often poor in spirit. But we are reminded at Pentecost that the gift of the Holy Spirit is ours; we only need to ask for it. How much proof do we need? We are told that God is love. This is the central message of all the world's great religions. In this love there is a great energy, the spirit of God’s Holy Spirit, symbolically depicted as wind or fire or even a dove.

Those who experience the Holy Spirit know that at the creative heart of the universe is this divine love. Indeed, there could be nothing without it. We are not denied this love; we are not denied the power of the Holy Spirit for ourselves. It is available right here and now if only we can open ourselves to its transforming power.

