

Ascension Sunday, 28th May 2017. Canongate Kirk.

Acts 1: 9 *a cloud took him out of their sight...*

One of the best pieces of advice that I ever got during my training for ministry, and to be honest one of the few that I really remember, came from the late Professor Duncan Forrester in a Pastoral Care class about bereavement. When there's been a death in the family, he said, you mustn't tell them they'll get over it, but you must try to reassure them that they will get through it. And that's what you're there for, to help them through it. It is especially true after a death in traumatic circumstances, and it is especially true in and around Manchester just now, where families who have been so shockingly bereaved will never get over it, how could they? Why would they? But somehow and however long it takes, they will get through it, even when they can't begin to see how. I wonder if there is an element of this in the response of the disciples to the ascension of Jesus after he is taken from them, after a cloud took him from their sight. The writer uses the same terms which families have been using to describe the appalling loss of their daughters and sons, taken from us too soon, taken all too early. *a cloud took him out of their sight...* And when such a cloud descends, a cloud of shock and horror, a cloud of anger and terror and sadness, it is very difficult to see the way forward, to begin to find a way through it all. For the families of Manchester it must be our prayer today that with the support of each other and their wider communities, and communities and congregations around the country, they will somehow get through it.

a cloud took him out of their sight... The disciples of Jesus were stunned. Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven, they are asked. Because they didn't know what else to do, they didn't know where else to look, where else to be, how else to get through it. They certainly wouldn't get over it, not these last three years since they had started to follow him into the unknown, and not these last forty days since that morning they had found the stone rolled away and the tomb standing empty. And now *a cloud took him out of their sight...* In the cloud of uncertainty and confusion that descended upon them, they stayed together, they returned to Jerusalem and they returned to the upper room where they were staying, they stayed together and they prayed together and they got through it together. In the Gospel according to St John, Jesus says "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world" And he prays for them "Holy Father, protect them, so that they may be one, as we are one." And it is as one that the disciples stayed and prayed together, coming to terms with the fact that they would see Jesus no longer, that he had been taken from them, that now they were on their own. Except of course they would not be on their own for long Jesus had promised that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit had come upon them just a few days later at Pentecost, and by that power they would continue his work even when *a cloud took him out of their sight...* Centuries later, St Theresa of Avila once reflected on the challenge to the generations of disciples that followed: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." It applies to every generation of Christ's friends and followers, from the first to the last, including ours. And ours are the hands and the feet and the eyes, for Christ has no body now on earth but ours. And as we take in our hands once again the symbols of his body and his blood, the body broken for us and the blood shed for us, it is for us to share every sufferer's prayer and help them through it.

Amen.