Ascension Day is one of the principal feasts of the Church of England. It’s one of those set points in the church’s year by which we navigate – one of the ‘feasts of obligation’, which all are expected to observe. Why might that be?

I’m sorry if the answer seems obvious: it marks the culmination of Christ’s earthly life and ministry, of course, and it confirms his destiny as Lord. It’s Luke who gives the richest details of Christ’s birth, and Luke again who tells us about the manner of his final physical departure. His is the gospel most concerned with history, with placing Jesus in the wider social and political context of his time – but his is also the gospel which anchors him not just in the present but, as it were, in the before and after.

So, if our faith is about Jesus, ascension is a key marker in our faith – it marks Jesus’ ministry amongst us. It also tells us where he is now: without Luke’s recording of the ascension, we would be without any sense of Jesus’ ultimate destination, his home. Resurrection proved simply that the story was not over with the cross. Ascension brings the story to its fulfilment – but not, of course, its end. That continues with the gift of Pentecost and the promise of his glorious return at the end of the ages, in the second coming.

Ascension lets us know that Jesus has gone home – and lets us know where that home is. The theology of ascension is actually more important than the mechanics, which can defeat us in their impossibility. The footprint in the stone in Jerusalem, the feet disappearing through the ceiling and so on. Mechanics and theology are not completely separable – because of the nature of the incarnation, the moving of Jesus physically from this earth is the context for the theology: just like the resurrection, the theology follows the physicality, but is not limited or determined by it. Jesus has, as the phrase goes, left the building.

So what are we to make of this? There’s something going on, but we don’t know what it is, as the song says. And that’s inevitable, because what’s going on is a window, or a door, into another world – and someone is going through it. The resurrection has proved that there is more going on in Jesus than ever met the eye: the ascension shows something about where that something different has stemmed from. It is, as Paul says, the power which raised him from the dead and now has seated him in the heavenly places.

What I would like to know is whether the disciples caught a glimpse of that as Jesus was taken from them. Was it like the light of transfiguration, which I can only suppose came from the same place? Was there a whiff of heaven, the catching on the ear of the sound of worship, or of laughter? If you could glimpse into heaven, what do you think you would see?

And as Jesus took his place there, what do you think the greeting would have been like?

Meanwhile ... we pray, as Jesus taught us, that the father’s kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. So our prayer – and our lives – are dedicated to the living out here and now, in our own context, the reality in which Jesus now dwells. It was of course present around him in earthly his life. Despite his context being that of this world, in Jesus we do not see a person who was subject to anyone but himself. If he became like a servant, it was his choice, always his, and could have been reversed at any moment – as the devil reminded him in the temptations.
We pray that our lives here may be a reflection of that glory glimpsed in Jesus’ arrival in heaven. We pray that our city may be a reflection of that glory.

The prayer of Paul in Ephesians is that the church would catch a vision of God’s glory – that our hearts would be enlightened to grasp something of the reality of the hope of God.

We gather for worship this evening beneath the tapestry. The largest vertical tapestry in the world until the 1990’s, apparently. The movement of the ascension is slightly difficult to grasp in our tapestry – perhaps it was the point where Jesus sat down ... and before he got up again to dance!

If our city is to reflect the glory of God in Christ in heaven, I think more of him dancing in the streets with the humble and lame, the rich and powerful – spinning them and us in a great dance in which he is the host and we are the guests.

In the ascension, the door is opened into heaven – it’s a door through which we are all invited. It stands open. Can we glimpse through – and will that glimpse give us a vision for the days and weeks and years to come?

I’d like to finish with a brief reflection on someone who is even now enjoying those things which we long to see. The American author Maya Angelou died this week – like many others I was smitten with her autobiography, ‘I know why the caged bird sings’. It’s extended account of how not just to survive, but how to survive with style – a useful image for us in the cathedral. More fully: “My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.” Or again, and this after a childhood at the wrong end of discrimination and abuse: “It’s one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive everybody.” Her last twitter post said this:

Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God.

And her family, following her death, had this to say:

“Her family is extremely grateful that her ascension was not belabored by a loss of acuity or comprehension.

“She lived a life as a teacher, activist, artist and human being. She was a warrior for equality, tolerance and peace. The family is appreciative of the time we had with her and we know that she is looking down upon us with love.”

That hope is anchored in the ascension of Christ. We may not be able to express exactly what it means, any more than we can exactly express the hope of heaven – but at its heart it’s about an eternity with Christ in a place where he is Lord and we are loved – and that’s something to pray for even now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen.