

2020 ASCENSION

On Saturday June 30th 2012 my time of Sabbatical at the Kinnoul Monastery in Perth Scotland was coming to an end. On the following Tuesday I would be busing to Edinburgh and from there would begin the long flight back to New Zealand.

I climbed a steep hill at the back of the monastery right to its summit where I had a breathtaking view of the City of Perth and of the majestic River Tay, winding its way through lush Scottish countryside and then meandering through the City of Perth itself. On that hill, in a warm but setting sun, I wept. I felt so very sad. I grieved that I would be leaving forever some wonderful new friends, who over the previous eight weeks had embraced me, with all my failings, with love. We had shared some of our most personal thoughts and fears. I grieved, also, that when I arrived back to New Zealand I would have to immediately say farewell to the Parish of Waihi. For three years I had finally been a Country Pastor and had reveled in it. A few weeks earlier Bishop Denis had rung me from New Zealand requesting that on my return I should go to Tauranga. Back to a big City again. That day on top of Mt. Kinnoul it impacted upon me that I was about to leave wonderful friends both in Scotland and also in Waihi. I felt sad.

I look back on that late afternoon, alone, looking down on Perth and its surrounds as a hugely significant moment in my life.

Dare I say it- it was similar in many ways to the moment Our Lord experienced on the top of Mount Bethany. With Jerusalem spread out in the distance before Him, He farewelled His mother, Mary, His close friends Peter, John, James, Mary Magdalen, Mary of Bethany, Lazarus, Martha and many other beloved followers. It was time to leave. It was time to say Goodbye.

Jesus would have been dreadfully sad. But if He was to be glorified and if the Church was to receive the Holy Spirit, the parting had to happen.

The dynamic I have just described is often referred to as the Paschal Mystery. What is the Paschal Mystery? A little reflection on the Paschal Candle burning in front of us may help.

On Easter Saturday night the Paschal Candle was lit for the first time. Its soft light represents Christ; once dead, now alive; shedding His light upon us.

In burning, the Paschal Candle will soon lose its beauty. Ugly wax will lump up on its sides. The etchings on the Candle will become deformed. But in

the process of being destroyed, it gives forth a glorious light reminding us of the great truth that God works powerfully in the midst of suffering bringing great good. We need to suffer- be it old age or illness-and to die- in order to come to eternal life. It is a fundamental truth that God transforms death into life, doubt into faith, despair into hope and darkness into light.

And so it was for me. Yes, I was immensely happy and at peace in Kinnoul. But being pampered is not what life is about. The end of my Sabbatical meant a new beginning for me. I had to leave my comfort zones and reach out to new people. A new Paschal Candle is made to be diminished. It is not to be left unlit on a stand looking all pretty. It has to be lit. It has to melt in order to shed light. So it was for me. So it is for all of us. And so it was for Jesus at the Ascension. Jesus had to leave all those He loved- as sad as this was- if the Kingdom of God was to grow on Earth.

On Ascension Day, the glory that belonged to Jesus as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was returned to Him. The Risen Lord was glorified once again as God- far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power or Domination. But for that to happen, He had to leave Earth.

Those left behind were not abandoned. Nine days later as they were gathered at prayer, the third Person of the Divine Trinity came upon them and empowered them to go out to the whole world and to share the truth that their beloved Jesus was God Himself to everyone on Earth.

No I didn't enjoy having to farewell those dear friends with whom I shared my Sabbatical. I didn't enjoy forgoing the joy of being a Country Pastor. But for all of us there are significant moments in our lives when we must bite the bullet and let go of people or places which have become very dear to us. It burns us up. But in facing up to what is clearly God's Will for us, we too are glorified. We become lights to our family, our friends and our neighbours.

Christians of the East have a beautiful custom. They light a candle from their Parish's Pascal Candle, take it home with them and place it in the front window of their homes. It is a poignant way of reminding them that the light of Christ must not just shine in their Church building. It must shine in their homes and out to all the neighbours.

We are lights of Christ. We must shine forth. And thus we have to grit our teeth to the reality that there will be sadness in our lives. Just like Paschal Candles we must allow ourselves to be melted by our suffering to give out the precious light of love. Love for God. Love for our neighbour.

