

## I am with you always

I had a student in China who was interested in becoming a Christian. He had no trouble with most of the story of Jesus, but he found it hard to understand what we meant when we said that the Son of God came down to us and then went up to heaven again. The more I thought about these teachings, the more sympathy I had with the Chinese student. I realised that these elements of our faith are not easy to fathom.

It is, indeed, a great mystery how God came down to us in Jesus – the Son of God coming to share our human nature. It is also a mystery how Jesus was lifted up to heaven again. And there is a further mystery, because while the Scriptures tell us that Jesus did ascend into heaven to take his place at the right hand of God the Father, they also tell us that he continues to be with us on earth.

Today's first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, highlights the lifting up of Jesus and his disappearing from sight. "He was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight."

By contrast, the gospel text from Matthew emphasises Jesus' continuing presence with his disciples. "Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."

Jesus is no longer present in the same way as he was when he was walking along the dusty roads of Galilee or teaching the people in the temple in Jerusalem. And yet he is still present.

Jesus is there when two or three gather in his name. He lives in the hearts and minds and lives of all who hold onto the word of God. He is with us under the appearances of bread and wine in the Eucharist. He is alive in all the peacemakers, the searchers for justice, the merciful, the meek, all those who get a mention in the Sermon on the Mount and those who try to keep the golden rule of loving their neighbour.

When we meet someone, we usually greet them with some form of "hello". When we part, we say "goodbye". In the story of the ascension, there is an element of "goodbye" but there is also a surprising element of "Hello, I'm still here!"

Jesus reassured his first disciples that he would still be with them even after he had disappeared from sight. He has continued this presence down through the ages. He reassures us today: "Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."