

Thursday was Ascension Day; exactly 40 days after Easter. For many Christians, particularly Catholics and High Anglicans, it was a day of special celebration of Christ ascending into heaven following his death, burial and resurrection.

We know this from a number of gospel narratives where Jesus presents himself 'alive' to the women near the tomb, to his disciples when he shares a meal with them and according to Paul in 1 Corinthians to more than 500 believers.

In our Acts narrative we heard that Jesus and his disciples went to the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem and he instructs his disciples for one last time; telling them to return to Jerusalem and wait until the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

There are many other references to the Ascension both in the gospels, throughout Acts and in the Epistles too.

Collectively, they assure us that Jesus' presence at the right hand of God means he is the perfect mediator between God and man. He is our intercessor or advocate in heaven; that he has gone ahead to prepare a place for us and that there is an umbilical cord like connection between the ascension of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit; that enduring gift bestowed on all true believers.

And whilst the Ascension signaled the end of his earthly ministry it also sets the scene and pattern of his return on judgement day. As he rises from the ground gradually and visibly he is lost from sight and engulfed by a cloud. And it is at this time that two men in white appear to tell the disciples that Jesus will return "in the same way as you saw him go into heaven".

Two men in white...now where have you heard of other men dressed in white?...In Mark's gospel the disciples entered the empty tomb and see a young man dressed in white; Matthew says an angel dressed in white rolled the stone back whilst in Luke's gospel there are two men whose clothes gleamed like lightening.

And at his transfiguration we are told Christ's clothes became dazzling white. At his baptism the Holy Spirit descends as a white dove and at his birth – well - isn't white the colour of innocence and purity?

And getting back to the Ascension, Jesus is lifted up into a cloud. Surely that cloud would have been white, wouldn't it?

And we often talk of the glory of the Lord, or his glory shone around – light and bright with golden hues. Traditionally we refer to the liturgical colour of white and gold as being one and the same; they are interchangeable – they represent the colours of light, triumph, joy and glory so that's how I imagined what any art work of the Ascension would be like.... white, light and bright.

So I got a shock when I googled some of the Ascension art works; here is the earliest example I could find dating back to 586 and one from a thousand years later.

That is not what I expected. Yes white is there, or perhaps gold is a better description but there is so much red and black.

And that set me thinking – the story of Creation through to the New Creation – can be reflected in those very same colours: gold, white, red and black.

So here's my challenge to you today: Don't think of the Ascension as a standalone event in Christ's ministry but as an integral event in God's great story.

Let me explain what I mean:

Right at the very start of Genesis there is the black of the unformed world, made good when God separates light from the darkness by creating the golden sun and the white moon. And the failure of the black Raven to find dry land when sent out by Noah contrasts with the success of the white dove.

Red needs little explanation – Blood is shed both to provide animal skins for the departing Adam and Eve; when Cain murders Abel and the blood of sacrifices throughout the Old Testament.

And these two colours are evident throughout the New Testament too – not only in Christ's blood on the cross but in the final book of the bible – Revelation - there is a whole kaleidoscope of white, gold, red and black vying for attention.

There are far too many examples to cite fully – here's just a few:

In chapter 4 there's a throne made of jasper and cornelian – both red minerals – and 24 elders dressed in white robes with golden crowns

Whilst in chapter 6 three of the four horses described in the breaking of the seals are...black, white and .....red. Souls of the slaughtered are given a white robe to wear and the sun becomes black as sackcloth and the full moon becomes like blood

And in between comes Jesus' life and ministry. I've already mentioned instances where white is evident.

Jesus cries out in despair on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Winston Churchill wasn't the only figure in history to suffer from what he called the black dog of despair.

And as Jesus dies, darkness comes over the whole land for three hours. Not just the usual 20 minutes when there is a total eclipse of the sun.

Peter denies Jesus three times before the cock crows. Two years ago when we visited Jerusalem and was walking towards what is called the Church of St Peter we heard a cock crow, And guess what colour it's head was -red.

And when the Centurion looked up at Jesus and says “surely this is the Son of God” - his cloak would have been red.

These are just some of the illustrations of the red and black threads woven through the tapestry of God's great story so at one level you can understand their prominence in the pictures we saw.

But at a much deeper or perhaps I should say higher level let me draw you back to the white and gold threads. They dominate Jesus' entry into our world as a babe and notwithstanding the black and red threads of despair or worse in the narrative surrounding his death and burial they are matched by the glimpses of white and gold threads woven through the baptism, transfiguration and resurrection narratives.

And it is these same white and gold colours which are present at Jesus' ascension.

My favourite musical is Les Miserables

One song, actually called Red and Black, contains the line:

The colour of the world is changing day by day.

It is indeed, or at least I hope you will agree.

In Les Misarables the students are preparing to fight and the song sets up the battle to come

Red – the blood of angry men

Black - the dark of ages past

And yet Marius has fallen in love and his song, woven through the anger and passion of the students speaks of love.

Had you been there today

You might also have known

How your world may be changed

In just one burst of light.

Victor Hugo's epic novel explores the same themes I have been exploring this morning - betrayal and suffering, redemption and glory. Ascension day reminds us of Christ's glorious victory and that his triumphant return one day will bring to closure once and for all, God's great plan for His creation and an end to suffering.

But in the mean time...we are Christ's body on earth. His mission was entrusted to the disciples and now to us. Until the day when Christ returns we have an opportunity to turn the blackness of despair into the white and gold of Salvation.

In entrusting this mission to us, Jesus did not leave us helpless, but sent his Spirit. As we pray “Thy Kingdom Come” between Ascension and Pentecost, let us seek every opportunity to bring the light of Christ into the darkness of the world.

