

ANN'S RAMBLES and REFLECTIONS **May 2021**
Going Up then Coming Down: Ascension then Pentecost

This May contains two major Christian Festivals sandwiched between two Bank Holidays.

Gone are the days when these Christian Festivals were public holidays. Today many/most people won't even notice these two Holy Days, falling this year on 13th May and 23rd May respectively. No decorations in shop windows or special presents to buy: and yet these two days are two of the most important in the Christian calendar. Are they just too mysterious? Too difficult to visualize? Too difficult to understand? The two events made me think about clouds and the images I see in their wide variety of shapes and colours



*I wandered lonely as a cloud That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

Well, let that be imagination – I wasn't lonely, although I was alone; those aren't daffodils but the brilliant yellow of oil seed rape (nor was I beneath the trees beside a lake). But these were the lines that came to mind, together with the whole idea of looking up, looking into the sky, looking up to what we call 'the heavens'. Looking up and trying to spot the skylarks. Looking up and imagining shapes in the clouds. Is this a glider making a rapid descent? Or



a gull, or an albatross? Looking up to see God? 'He's watching you from on high' (CCTV!?!); Heavens above! A very traditional non-scientific viewpoint, a common belief in Jesus' day. and one still in common parlance.



What did those eleven disciples witness on the slopes of the Mount of Olives? What did happen at the Ascension? After Jesus had told them to await the coming of the Holy Spirit 'he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight' (Acts 1v9). Jesus and clouds: in Advent we sing:

*Lo, he comes with clouds descending, once for favoured sinners slain;
thousand thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! God appears on earth to reign.*

Now at Ascensiontide I struggle to find a hymn that focusses on the event. Perhaps

I'll change the words above to '*Lo. He goes in clouds ascending God ascends to heaven to reign*'

Wesley's great Easter hymn 'Hail the day that sees him rise' includes the verse:

*Saviour, parted from our sight, Alleluia! High above yon azure height, Alleluia!
Grant our hearts may thither rise, Alleluia! Following Thee beyond the skies. Alleluia!*

(the words seem to vary enormously, and this verse is sometimes omitted)

The forecast of a cloudy day can give me a negative vibe in contrast to the sun. Clouds could mean rain, so I can't do the things I want to do. But that rain is absolutely essential for us; as essential for life as much as the sun gives heat, and we are just going through a period of drought. The symbolism of clouds apparently occurs over 100 times in the Bible. Most significantly they are often used to indicate the presence of God. The pillar of cloud led the Israelites out of Egypt; at the Transfiguration Peter, James and John witnessed the glory of God – "A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, whom I have chosen, listen to Him!" (Luke 9v15).



Sometimes though the clouds are associated with the anger of God as in Graham Kendrick's

*O Lord, the clouds are gathering The fire of judgement burns How we have fallen!
O Lord, You stand appalled to see Your laws of love so scorned And lives so broken. Have mercy Lord.*

So, in this month of May please join me, stop, look up, marvel at the clouds and remember God is with us, Emmanuel. His Spirit should be a breath of fresh air and renewal.