

Downside musicals in the Lent Term usually have their opening night on a **Thursday**. The drama that unfolded on the Ascension of Jesus also took place on a Thursday, forty days after His resurrection back on Easter Sunday. On Ascension Thursday, as we heard, Jesus Christ was lifted up into the air. As the Schola will later sing, *God is gone up with a triumphant shout: the Lord with sounding trumpets' melodies.*

Eight short weeks ago, also on a Thursday, the long-awaited Downside production of Mary Poppins began, the first of three incredible performances offered to the School and local community. A timeless classic with songs such as *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* that many have known and loved since the 1960s. The Ascension has its own readings and songs that are familiar: we'll sing *Alleluia Sing to Jesus* later. Verse two tells the story: *Tho' the cloud from sight received Him when the forty days were o'er, shall our hearts forget His promise, "I am with you evermore"?*

Both Thursday dramas share things in common. A unique person appears as if from heaven, like no one they've ever met before, blessing and loving those around them through their teaching and actions. Mary Poppins with the Banks family. Jesus with his followers. Both work miracles and give themselves to service. Both build community. Both experience rejection and depart for a time, leaving those left behind sorrowful and bereft. Both return with joy, for a short time until their work is done and their message known. After the resurrection, the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days, a truly wonderful time.

Then there's the outreach factor and seeing the good in those different to us. Jesus befriended tax collectors and lepers, the downtrodden; whilst Mary Poppins and the children befriended a chimney sweep with a heart of gold. Like Bert among the rooftops, the disciples were taught to see the world from a higher perspective. Mary Poppins sings of the poor old bird woman in *Feed the Birds* from the steps of a Cathedral, including this rhyme:

*All around the cathedral, the saints and apostles,
look down as she sells her wares.
Although you can't see it, you know they are smiling,
each time someone shows that he cares.*

And remember, at the end of the story, she went up into the sky with an umbrella in hand, promising to return when the east wind brought her back. So too Jesus ascended promising that he would return,

and nine days later the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. The disciples too would soon learn to fly their kite into the wind of the Spirit.

One of the songs that made me sit up that Thursday in the theatre was called: *Jolly Holiday with Mary*. The Ascension is a holy day, the very origin of our word ‘holiday’. And Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there with the disciples. In that sense, the Ascension is a holy day with Mary. And St Luke tells us that Ascension day was jolly and joyful, as afterwards the followers of Jesus returned to Jerusalem with great joy, praising God continually.

Their joy might seem surprising. Their Saviour had disappeared into thin air. And what about the Banks family in the musical, could not Mary Poppins have stayed and not left? Even the bitter medicine of loss can, by grace, go down with a spoonful of joy.

If Mary Poppins had stayed, the Banks family might never have become what they were meant to be. Her task was to change them so deeply that they could live differently without her. By the end of the musical, Mr Banks sees the world in a new way. The children have learned compassion and wonder. The family is stronger. She leaves not because she does not love them, but because she does love them.

So too with the Ascension. Jesus does not abandon His disciples, but empowers them to become His Body in the world. Before the Ascension, the disciples followed Jesus from place to place. After the Ascension, they themselves become apostles, preachers, martyrs and saints. They were no longer merely spectators of the Kingdom; they were called to build it. By ascending Christ becomes present in a new way: through His Church, through the sacraments, through the Holy Spirit, and through the lives of believers. It marks the birth of the Church’s mission. The bewildered disciples who gazed upwards at the sky would soon go out into the world with courage, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And perhaps that is the lesson both stories leave us with. Love that is true does not cling possessively. Good teachers, good parents, good friends, and above all Christ Himself, prepare others to stand on their own feet. Sometimes the greatest act of love is to step back so that others may grow. Dear brothers and sisters, Christ has ascended, but He has not left us. As the hymn says: *Alleluia! bread of heaven, here on earth our food, our stay*. He remains with His people always – not distant from the world, but alive within it, calling us to carry His joy, His love, and His Gospel into the world.