

In the 1950s, before long distance flying was common, one of the many bonuses of living near a large sea-port such as Singapore, was that one had lots of opportunity of going on board ocean liners to say farewell to friends as they came home to this country. Some would be leaving permanently, others would return after six months' leave. Although we were sorry to see them go, it was always a happy and joyous time. For, after a few drinks together on deck, we would wait on the quayside for the ship to leave. As the ship pulled slowly away and we looked up and waved our farewells, with the odd tear in our eye, any sadness of parting was relieved by the paper streamers and the ship's hooters sounding merrily, and by the thought that our friends were happy to be going on leave.

Sometimes I think that for Jesus' disciples who were there at the time, the Ascension of our Lord must have been something like that. St Luke tells us in his book called the Acts of the Apostles (1.9) that "as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight". In his Gospel (24.44-53), St Luke tells us that on the fortieth day after Easter, Jesus led the disciples out from Jerusalem to Bethany; the village where Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived. He did not say Goodbye to them because he would still be with them always. Be with them until they came to that place to which he was going, to prepare for them. So he just raised his hand in blessing and, as he blessed them, Jesus parted from them. Now the disciples realised for sure that the Easter appearances were over. You might think that this would make them sad. But we know it was not so, for we read: "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God".

Why did this final parting of their Lord not make them sad? It was because Jesus had given them the assurance of his continuing presence, and the support of the Holy Spirit. By his Ascension into heaven, by his being taken up, Jesus had made his "Goodbye" into "God be with you". Although we do not always think of it that way, you probably know that the word 'Goodbye' is a contraction from 'God be with ye'. In its longer form it seems to have so much more power. Think then on the Ascension from that point of view. Jesus had to go back to heaven for our good. He had to go for, as Risen Lord, he could only be visibly present to a few people at one time. But as Ascended Lord, he could and still can, be invisibly present to us all; whenever and wherever he is wanted. Remember that when you need help; he is there, he is here. If you fail to remember him, he is still there with you. Loving, judging, watching over, and yearning for you to love him. Always God is there. Goodbye is a word of parting. But 'God be with you', is a word of protective presence.

We often use this word Goodbye. Let us consider a few instances where, because of the Ascension, this word can indeed become for us 'God be with you'. A young mother sees her nine year old daughter off to school each day. The little girl has a short way to go, with a road or two to cross. Wendy's mother is not stupidly superstitious. She knows that her prayers might be of no help if a driver in charge of a car proves to be careless; or if the devil tries out his planned activities against Wendy. But the mother rightly feels a lot happier because of her prayers; for she knows that

through the Ascension, Jesus will always be with her daughter in times of danger and temptation.

Some of my most happy personal memories as a young boy were of the brief visits of my favourite Uncle, Walter. This was not because he always gave me half-a-crown when he arrived, though that was a fortune in those days, equivalent to a month's pocket money! No, he gave me a gift which I have treasured even more through my life. Whenever he said "Good-night" to me, he would kiss me on the brow or cheek, and add: "God be with you and bless you". In those days no-one else ever said that to me, and it made me go to sleep feeling warm, and safe, and secure, and wanted. Childhood fears of the dark did not exist on those nights, for I was not alone.

Think now of the Goodbye of the parents of a son or daughter called away for service in a war zone. Again there is no superstition in their minds. They do not believe that though dozens of other soldiers with 'Leslie/Lesley' might be killed or seriously injured, that because of their prayers Leslie will go unscathed. If that were Christianity, then everyone would become a Christian. Leslie's parents did however, want to commend him or her to God, and they felt the assurance that he would be with Leslie no matter where they were or what happened to them. This too, is the faith of parents of young people who emigrate to foreign lands; or indeed the parents of any young boy or girl going away from home to work or study. As a hymn by J.E. Rankin says:

"God be with you till we meet again;
When life's perils thick confound you,
Put his arm unfailing round you:
God be with you till we meet again."

Fourthly, what a poignant moment it is when we leave someone we love, after taking them to hospital as a patient. We can do little then to help them - except to pray. All those unpleasant things: x-rays, blood tests, injections, the operation, pain; they must bear them without you. So the poignant - Goodbye Jim, or Jane. However you say it, you know that *that* Goodbye certainly means God be with you.

But one day, inevitably, there comes that very last Goodbye for us all. The Goodbye of death. Goodbye husband; Goodbye wife; Goodbye mother; Goodbye father; Goodbye friend. But as Christians we are so very fortunate to have the assurance that even that Goodbye is but God be with you. For they have gone to that place to which our Lord went; to prepare a place for us all. "God be with you till we meet again" are words of faith on many a gravestone.

So rejoice in the Lord always; rejoice that by his Ascension into heaven, Jesus made his own Goodbyes mean 'God be with you': and thereby makes all the Goodbyes of our lives mean the same.