The feast of the Ascension, celebrated across the universal Church last Thursday, proclaims Jesus Christ ‘risen, ascended, glorified’, at the Father’s right hand. In his ascension Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, takes his humanity into heaven, opening it to our humanity also. Metaphorically Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and there, at the heart (another metaphor) of the divine Trinity, he prepares a place for us. This is the fulfilment of the incarnation: the body of Christ, divine and human, the body that was knit together in the womb of Mary, is now glorified to enter the heavenly Kingdom and pave the way for us to enter in his footsteps. Heaven and earth folded in a single peace.

This luminous feast of the Ascension of Christ does not always sit easily with the reality of life as we now experience it. The glorious truths proclaimed by the Ascension were especially hard to announce last week, just three days after Monday night’s bombing in Manchester. Twenty-two people murdered – including children, young mothers and fathers; scores of others injured or left psychologically scarred for years to come. Their lives are no more and no less valuable than those of all the many others who are maimed or die violently across the world every day – most recently the 28 Coptic men, women and children killed in Egypt on Friday. But there is something particularly hideous about the calculation that led the Manchester bomber to choose a pop concert packed with children as his target. Whereas Al Qaeda focussed principally on military and economic targets, ISIS casts its net wider. For ISIS young girls and their families at a pop concert are legitimate targets because they are held to represent the immoral lifestyle of the so-called Crusader nations. We must say again that Islamist extremists do not speak for Islam, but we must also recognise that the motivation for these acts is not obscure. What we rightly regard as a callous atrocity would in the warped mind of its perpetrator have been a legitimate act of cleansing punishment.

I’ve never been keen on the conundrum known as the problem of evil. This philosophical-theological conundrum is usually posed as the question: if God is all good and all powerful, where does evil come from and what does it mean? Of course this is an entirely valid and challenging question that all of us who call ourselves Christians must ask. And of course possible solutions are available: God’s respect for our created freedom; the responsibility incumbent on us to use that freedom to pursue and punish those who commit evil acts; Christ’s enduring of evil through his death on the cross; the promised glorious consummation of our world, when we the forces of evil will be overcome.

But to ask the question of the problem of evil and believe that we have comprehensively answered it would be almost idolatrous. In the face of evil acts like that in the Manchester Arena on Monday, intellectual argument about theodicy falls tragically short. So, rather than talk of the problem of evil, I prefer the older term: the mystery of evil, *mysterium iniquitatis*, the confounding abyss of sin, whose origin and scope we can scarcely comprehend, but which finally we believe to be contained, overcome, extirpated, by a still greater mystery, that of the salvation wrought by Christ, *mysterium salutis*. 
What are we to make, then, of this week’s terrible juxtaposition? The death and destruction of Monday evening; the light and life of Thursday’s feast.

As so often, when words fall short, pictures can help. Two in particular have helped me. The first is that of the Manchester taxi drivers, who leapt into action making sure that they got lost and shocked teenage girls home to their parents. Many of them were Muslims; but more importantly they were simply fellow parents, fellow humans beings, reaching out in solidarity.

The other picture that has helped me is a religious one: the icon associated with the feast of the ascension in the Orthodox Church of the East. At first sight this icon looks like a simple illustration of the picture we are given in Acts: the twelve apostles gathered outside Jerusalem, witnessing Jesus lifted up, a cloud taking him out of their sight. Look more closely, though, and you notice that there are fifteen figures standing on the hillside. In addition to the eleven apostles we would expect, there is, first, saint Paul. Historically he could not have been present, but he is included as a witness to the risen Christ. Having seen the divine light on the road to Damascus, he is numbered among the apostles, a member so to speak of the apostolic college. Paul stands towards the edge of the group, but closer to its centre are two androgynous figures with haloes. These are the cherubim, the two angels who sat within the tomb of Christ after the resurrection, ‘sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet’. At the resurrection these angels reflect the two cherubim who sat at either end of the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. The cherubim of the ark define an empty space where the God of Judah is made known; in the empty tomb again they flank an empty space where the God revealed in Jesus Christ has gone before. And here in the icon of the Ascension, the two angels, now standing, arms stretched aloft, point the apostles and us with them to the wondrous event depicted above. And finally the fifteenth figure standing on the hillside is Mary, the Mother of the Lord. Mary stands in the central axis of the icon in direct alignment with Christ as he ascends. ‘Let it be with me according to thy word’, says Mary at the annunciation when Christ’s coming among us is heralded; and here, without speaking, she seems to utter the same words: let it be with me, let it be with us, according to thy word: may we too ascend to the place where he is gone before.

This, of course, is the prayer we have offered in this morning’s collect:

O GOD the King of glory, who hast exalted thine only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph unto thy kingdom in heaven: We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

At first glance all of this can look rather like the famous pie in the sky when you die of ignorant critique. In fact it is the opposite in almost every sense: not pie, not in the sky, not when you die. The truth announced in the ascension of Christ is not about a heavenly reward somewhere else accessible only after death. It is about the union here and now of earth and heaven, the face to face encounter with the undying grace of God that transforms us, through and through, body, soul and spirit.

‘You shall be holy for I am holy’, says the Lord in Leviticus, words repeated in the first letter of Peter. Strictly holiness is the quality of God: God who is utterly other than we are; God who is the Creator, not created. Yet the scriptures attribute holiness not just to God, but
to the created things of God too. There is an instance in each of this morning’s readings: the adjective holy used of things that are not God:

‘God sitteth upon his holy seat’, says the Psalm.

‘They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain’, says the Lord

‘And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God’

In the psalm God is above, seated in authority, lofty and inaccessible. In Isaiah the prophet offers a vision of holiness accessible to all. But in Revelation the holiness of the Lord descends and all of us are invited in to the city to share it.

O GOD the King of glory… exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before,

The ‘whither’ of the collect, points not so much a place as a state inaugurated in Christ’s ascension, a state into which we are invited to enter, even in spite of the evil all too apparent within us and around us.

Once again: we cannot deny the mysterium iniquitatis, the confounding abyss of sin, whose origin and scope we can scarcely comprehend, but in Christ, risen, ascended, glorified, we believe it to be contained, overcome, extirpated, by a still greater mystery, that of the salvation wrought by Christ, mysterium salutis.

‘I dwell in a high and holy place and with him who is broken and humble in spirit’ (Isa 57:15). Above and below, God is with us to save us.

In nomine…