

Recent events re-introduced me to the songs of “The Wizard of Oz” (1939), among which is the wistful “Over the Rainbow” (effectively Judy Garland’s signature song). The lyricist of that song, Edgar “Yip” Harburg, also wrote the lyrics for one of the key songs of the US Great Depression, “Brother, can you spare a dime?” (1930).

Full of pathos, the 1930 song reflects the devastating effect of a person’s dignity destroyed because of the selfishness of a privileged few. It also implies the betrayal of the common man despite doing his part: constructing railroads, digging coal, fighting his country’s wars, farming the land, etc.

The 1939 song, however, realises there must be a better reason for our existence than just existing here and now. Dorothy is puzzled about how to get to this place “where troubles melt like lemon drops” and all our best hopes are more than met. It’s a song of the Hebrews; a longing for the promised land.

Hardly surprising: Yip had an orthodox Jewish upbringing, which must also have influenced the sentiments of the 1930 song, the expectations of covenant and justice that the Hebrew Scriptures constantly report and reflect upon.

Yet this month we celebrate how Jesus, having overcome, by his trust in God, the common lot of disappointment and betrayal of his unfaltering love for us, leads the real way forward. Not ephemeral rainbows and astral wishes, but a real route to a real destination. Despite what you might read about “logical” explanations for the Ascension of Jesus, after the events of Holy Week and Easter there is no rationale in then bringing this story back down to earth.

This, therefore, is the way: no more betrayal, back-stabbing, looking after number one at the expense of the dignity of others. Doing what God has commanded is for our own good, assuring us of our own eventual ascension. We’ll be affirmed in that by seeing all God’s people ascending the plight of misery here, now. In date order, have a listen to these two songs again (try YouTube, look for the Jolson and Garland versions). This Ascension, think about where we’ve come from - and where we’re heading.