

In medieval times attendance at church used to be standing room only - mainly because there were no pews! Also because it, almost literally, used to scare the hell out of people. Ah, the good old days...

At the end of the month we'll be celebrating Ascension Day again, enormously diminished in the public consciousness. Yet it concerns the biggest question of all: what happens next? Are we going to heaven (following Jesus)? If not, then where?

Many commentators point out that the picture of Old Nic with pitchfork and fiery furnace, tormentors and eternal agony, is mainly a medieval construct. (As I said above, it certainly worked!) They are only partly correct; there are plenty of Bible references to what heaven's alternative is like, some of those coming from Jesus himself. One thing is for certain in my reading of it all: eternity (longer than you think) is not a time (oxymoron) you want to spend outside the presence of God... Whereas threats of hell comprise pretty negative stuff, the Ascension of Jesus couldn't be more positive. Christians believe he has been to hell, broken out and shown the alternative "what comes next" with an unmistakable message of God's promises fulfilled by Jesus' return to the place where God fully is. The Church attaches so much importance to this event that its festival is one of the three obligatory days to gather for worship, even ahead of Christmas.

(Take note, all you Christians: 18.00, St Mary's, Thursday 29 May!)

Like all good news, however, there have been negative theories about what happened to Jesus after the Resurrection. One, coming from a particularly bad piece of research, had him going off to India to do a Beatles '68 Maharishi thing. That died the death it deserved. Another was Dan-Brownish in its theory of Jesus "settling down" with Mary Magdalene. Nice thought - although you've got to wonder why no-one ever mentioned it when writing about him.

Anyway, if Jesus has won the victory over death, surely the conditions in which we enjoy them must be better than just hanging around here forever in whatever state we happen to find ourselves.

So the choice is like this: either drive (a loose term here) around the M25 for eternity or return to the idyll that is our part of the country; push those ideas to their greatest extremes and glimpse the choice we're being offered. Do you want to go to heaven - or risk the alternative, whatever that is? Think carefully. It's not a trick question.