

The Ascension 2018

"Thatye may become partakers of the divine nature... " [2. Pet. 1:4]

Perhaps of all the events of our Lord's mission, this act of ascending is one of those that raises some of the largest quantity of questions and eyebrows. Now questioning is not the best way to approach God, nor yet is it faithless or wrong. Firstly we might ask "where is God?" Is He everywhere or is He nowhere? In suggesting that He is nowhere, I am not implying that it is permissible to say that God does not exist! merely that it is necessary to say that He does not occupy space. Or might it be better - as the Old Testament often seems to state matters - to say that God is where He chooses to be? The whole history of the hill shrines, and then of the Temple itself, is about God choosing to be found at certain points under heaven.

Now, at Christmass we certainly celebrate God being somewhere. It took centuries upon centuries to instil the truth that God does not occupy space. God has always been invisible, yet, despite this, we creatures continued to think of Him as a very big figure, hiding out there somewhere. At length, however, the prophets guided the Old Testament faithful away from thinking of God in exclusively human-centred terms, only for God to (seemingly) undo all their excellent spade-work by actually becoming man! And the Jewish and Muslim believers are quite right to find this idea shocking - even disgusting - and we are quite wrong to be unsurprised by the idea that God took flesh. But we are quite right to accept it, and they are quite wrong to reject it. So it is that at Christmass we celebrate God being somewhere. This alone would account for the popularity of our mid-Winter celebration, for what is the point of a God who is far removed from us and seemingly uninterested in the very beings that He chose to create?

In the process of God becoming man, however, we had to learn that God was an even bigger figure than we had previously thought. He was not just an isolated entity but modes-of-being in Himself- the mode of Fatherhood, the mode of Sonship and (after further controversy we learnt) the mode of eternal Procession. We will have to address this conceptual difficulty of Three Persons in just three Sundays' time, of course. So, at Christmass we learn that it was not the mode of Fatherhood that became man, nor yet the mode of going forward (or Procession) but the mode of Sonship that assumed humanity. We also learnt that to speak so technically and coldly of *modes* in God was inadequate, that it did not do justice to His love. God within Himself is an eternal communion of love, moreover "love came down at Christmass." That is love was in God but also *from* God.

In the Ascension, however, we learn that even the Eternal Son does not exactly go up and down, here and there. The cloud that received Christ was not just a dramatic prop in an exotic story but the sign of God's Presence - the Shekinah. In that the Eternal Son was none other than the Eternal God, it was impossible that He could leave one state or realm to go to another. It would be better to say that He took upon Himself the nuisance of time, place and Body. He dispossessed or *emptied* Himself, but He did not actually lose anything. This is where our interpretations of the Ascension can go slightly adrift. Our hymns refer to Christ returning to His home, but this is not exactly true. Christ never left heaven nor did He abandon earth. Of course there was a *change* - although not a change in God but in history, in theology and in our situation - even a sequence of changes. He submitted to the eclipse of His glory, His divinity and - possibly (and considerably more controversially) - the eclipse of His all-knowingness. Whatever was and was not eclipsed, eclipse of some severity there certainly was. And one of the central features of this very festival that most gladdens us is that there is now no more eclipse at all.

We look back, not just to Christmass, but more immediately to Holy Week just gone. We saw how Christ had taken the role of both priest and victim at the Supper; and then how He maintained these roles even as He was being arrested, fraudulently tried and ripped to pieces. How, upon the life-giving Cross, He exercised His priesthood and submitted to death as Victim, and finally how He resumed the full, un-eclipsed dignity of that priesthood in the uncreated, high-priestly garments of imperishable resurrection-light within the Kingdom. We have difficulty in conceptualizing the Ascension (or, in that tooth-grating terminology of our times, 'relating to it'). The Lord's life in heaven cannot be *described* (as was His life on earth). Nevertheless, two books of Scripture, in particular, try to picture the Lord's work, rule and glory there - the Epistle to the Hebrews and Revelation. One of these books is quite hard to understand, and the other is near impossible, but that's heaven for you! God grant that we shall understand this far better by actually being admitted there ourselves.

And Heaven, for us, is not just a near-death/after death experience, nor something that has no connexion with or relevance to this world of sense-perception. God is already conveying His glory to us, and this has been especially stated in today's festival. Some of the most ancient of today's liturgical material is concerned not with God moving about or the Eternal Word leaving one place for another but with God making us partakers of His divine nature. And this too is very shocking and destabilizing. We should never forget that we are mere creatures - and far worse, very sinful creatures - and that God is unique and unapproachable. And yet, and yet, God is drawing us into Himself. In previous years I have commented with regret about how poor old Cranmer thought that this was a liturgical exuberance too far, and yet he must have known that it was no mere fancy of the Fathers nor sophistry of the Schoolmen, for he read it often enough in 2 Peter. Still it was too much for this troubled archbishop. With some clumsiness, therefore (in due course) I try to restore that most essential element of the Ascensiontide Preface "that He might make us partakers of His divinity," and I recite another prayer (that Cranmer struck out altogether) which speaks of Christ establishing this participation in God at His Ascension.

All this sounds very grand and triumphant, but I'm guessing that none of us feel especially radiant today - or most days? We pray that we really are being transformed. Were we conscious of the process, however, it would probably unravel. We know that even St. Peter himself sunk in the waters as he pressed forward to meet the risen Lord. Indeed Peter, as a character, seems emblematic of this 'dust and glory' combination/contradistinction that features so prominently in our profession. It is all God's work in us, not our N.V.Q or B.A. We take this on faith and in hope. Today let us not dwell on the difficulties which ever beset the soul's pilgrimage, but rejoice in the triumph of the Lord that is becoming our triumph.

An afterthought: this sermon may have overcomplicated a direct meaning in this event - that Christ rose, certainly, but so rose as never to die again but to reign as our Sovereign Priest and Saviour.

Also worth noticing is this stray quotation from a book by Bishop Anthony Thorold (of Rochester and later Winchester) - a nineteenth century persecutor of Fr. Tooth and yet not lacking in his grasp of this mystery:

"But it is His Resurrection and Ascension that have made Him all these. He is light to the angels in Heaven, who, through the Church, now discern in Him, as they could not before discern, the manifold wisdom of God. He is light to mankind upon earth, who in beholding Him behold the Father in righteousness, mercy, and truth. He is light to the spirits in Hades, to some of whom once, after he had tasted death for all men, He Himself preached the Gospel, surely not in vain. He is light to devils in hell, to whom the Resurrection was the utter foiling of and baffling of the mystery of evil, when most it thought to triumph by precipitating the tragedy of the Cross. "Having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show openly, triumphing over them in it."