

Reflections on the Ascension of Our Lord

By Edward J. Parkinson, Ph.D.

Upon first consideration there seems to be something incongruous in celebrating the Ascension of Our Lord, for we are celebrating His departure from us, His leaving the earthly plane on which we live and which is the dominant focus of our experience. "Where I go, you cannot come," said Jesus (John:8:21), and now, St. Paul seems to suggest, we are something like blind men, forced to "walk by faith and not by sight"(2 Corinthians:5—7). It often seems to us that we would be more fortunate if we were living in Israel in the first century and could access the Lord Christ directly for healing, encouragement, guidance, answers to specific questions, etc. Surely then our faith and courage would be unshakeable, with Lord Christ Himself among us in the flesh.

The biblical accounts seem, moreover, to be so quaint, so dated, so dependent upon an outdated cosmology and a pre-technological world view that they appear to be irrelevant to our experience. To these early Christian witnesses this event was of earth shaking paranormal significance. Most twenty-first-century Liberal Catholics, however, have been over clouds so often in airplanes that celebrating such a journey seems like the enthusiasm of a young child upon being allowed to walk down a city block alone for the first time. Furthermore, if we were atheists or agnostics, such a vision, let alone a report of such a vision—a man ascending beyond the clouds—would be unlikely to impress us. I, for one, would suspect any one of a number of things: a magnet attached to the man and concurrently a magnet hovering overhead at a great height in a helicopter; an invisible glass screen on which could be projected a photographic illusion; a contraption containing a gas, which would elevate the man along with the gas container; perhaps even a difficult to see or invisible rope (after all there are so many advances in chemistry today that even specialists in very narrow areas are hard put to keep up with all of them) which would be attached to a helicopter or some other object in the sky, perhaps even an infrared or ultraviolet balloon. And we would expect such a man to be tracked "down" (take that as pun if you want) very quickly. Somebody would call the police, and pretty soon police helicopters, satellite cameras, and other technological "miracles" would locate the man long

before he got anywhere near out of the earth's atmosphere. And, of course, even if he did get out of the earth's atmosphere, that seems like no big deal in a century in which we send ships with cameras to the edges of our solar system. If the man "dematerialized" in the course of the ascent, even that we could handle without being overwhelmed. Physicists today, after all, are experimenting with making particles disappear in a particular location and then appear elsewhere without traveling through the intervening space, and who is to say how close or far we are from doing something similar with human bodies? So the *wonder*, the life changing *shock* of the event as it was experienced by the first Christians seems to elude us and render empty an experience which the biblical authors, Matthew and Luke, are inviting us to share.

But when we read the bible for religious purposes—as opposed to reading it as an adjunct to historical or archeological research, for instance—we always read it to experience *for ourselves* those things the biblical writers are relating. We never read scripture in church primarily to learn about what happened to people who lived in this world thousands of years ago, but always to learn about ourselves and to re-create for ourselves those events, those experiences, that were so important to our ancestors in faith. So the signal question is, how do we do that in regard to the Ascension narratives? How do we enter in to the experiences of those early Christians who witnessed or first heard about the Ascension and bring the essentials of their experience into our lives as twenty-first - century Gnostic Christians?

Somewhat paradoxically, I think, we need to get out of our world, temporarily abandon our customary ways of thinking about the universe, in order to bring the Ascension experience into our world. We need to temporarily, empathetically, adopt their earlier, more primitive ways of thinking, in order to bring the Ascension reality into our present experience and see in it depths, some of which the early Christians could never have imagined. In a nutshell: we need to go back in order to move forward.

We need to understand how the universe looked to ancient peoples. Their views were pretty much the same all over the world.

Ancient people believed the earth was a flat surface and that, consequently, if they went too far to the north or to the south or to the east or to the west, they might fall off. Regions very far from them in any of these directions were considered mysterious and threatening—with strange savage people, perhaps, and animals different from any they

were used to. Several miles above was heaven, right beyond the clouds, the abode of the gods and, in some cultures, saintly people who had died and containing, of course, the sun and the moon and the stars. Below the surface of the earth, again several miles, was the netherworld, the abode of the dead and of various spirits, most of whom were not benign.

So, to employ a simile, we could say that their mental universe was something like a church where we worship on Sunday. In this world, to speak metaphorically, we would be living on the main floor of the church, containing the pews and sanctuary. The church would have a basement for the most part inaccessible to us until we left the main floor and went downstairs never to return. On the opaque roof—corresponding to what is beyond the clouds and the blue surface of the sky—would be another community, which we could not see but which could affect us very powerfully.

On Ascension Thursday, to stay with that metaphor, we celebrate not only Jesus' ascension onto the roof of the building, but also his new omnipresence on the main floor, permeating in a new way our experiences there, as well as his descent into the basement after his death on Good Friday. Why is that?

Many non-Catholics express puzzlement over the fact that the Roman Catholic Church, while promulgating many holy days of obligation throughout its history, has never required Mass attendance on Holy Thursday, even though that is one of the most significant days in the Church year. The reason is that the Triduum—extending from sundown on Holy Thursday through the end of Easter Sunday and including Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday-- is a unity, in reality only one celebration. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are not distinct feasts in themselves, but rather aspects of the Easter Event; consequently, the obligation is fulfilled by the Mass attendance on Easter Sunday. Holy Thursday and the institution of the Eucharist make no sense without the Resurrection, since we receive the Risen Christ in the Holy Eucharist, and the Resurrection makes no sense without Good Friday and the period in the tomb through Holy Saturday.

Well, similarly, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the Ascension, and the outpouring of divine energy on Pentecost Sunday, when Jesus through the Holy Spirit begins to be with us in a new way—these are all aspects of a single transformative event in which Jesus' earthly incarnate existence becomes a new transcendent way of being with us. These are, in their deepest reality, one Event, not separate events. We celebrate them as separate

events because it is easier for us at our present stage of development to grasp things that way, not because the events are separate in themselves. "The way up and the way down are the same," an oft-quoted Buddhist saying says, and the significance of the Ascension lies in Jesus' having done both.

What would these trips up and down mean to the Christians of the first century?

I think much of the meaning could be encapsulated in a short phrase—"freedom from fear" and in the statement, "We are always accompanied by a powerful Protector and Guide." Let me explain.

The main floor of our church, to stay with our metaphor, would represent experience that was comparatively known and controllable. People did not know what was very far south or north or east or west, but they could rationally think of and in the future hope to plan expeditions to any of those regions. They might encounter monsters, but those, while they would be animals of different species, would be animals nonetheless, a reality with which they were familiar. The people they encountered might be very strange, but they would nevertheless be people.

The netherworld and the heavens, in contrast, would be productive of a type of terror that nothing on the surface of the earth could engender. The netherworld was the abode of the dead, and who wants to be dead? Who can fathom what it would be like to be dead? The netherworld, moreover, was a realm of evil spirits, mysterious, powerful beings who could, under cover of darkness, do great harm. It was a realm of dark forces which could be accessed by evil magicians in the forms of spells and curses. The heavens were sources of the life-giving powers of the sun and life-giving rain, but also could be sources of terrible storms, droughts, floods, and famines caused by bad weather conditions. We have to remember that the first-century Christians, whether Jewish or gentile, lived in the Roman Empire and, consequently, were deeply affected in their thinking by its dominant polytheistic culture. The gods were considered to be very powerful beings but very childish, unpredictable. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, as well as in the *Aeneid* of Virgil, we read how Hera, for example, would do something terrible to the Greeks or Trojans because she was mad at her husband Zeus for some reason. These gods could be influenced only slightly, if at all, by human beings.

But the descent of Jesus into hell and his ascent into heaven freed first-century Christians from fear of what lay outside of their experience. They were no longer afraid

of death because Jesus, who was totally on their side, even to the point of undergoing Good Friday for them, had conquered death, robbed it of its power, by experiencing death and rising from the grave. "O death, where is thy victory?" St. Paul says. "O death, where is thy sting?"(1 Corinthians:15:55). Fear of evil spirits and other dark forces was laid to rest by Jesus having gone down there and triumphed over them. The human beings in the Christian communities didn't know or understand everything about what was down there, but Jesus did because he had been there and he was, they knew, completely on their side. Fear of an unpredictable, whimsical Divine Providence was laid to rest by Jesus' ascension to the right hand of the Father. Imagine if you were going to New York or Chicago with a group of people and heard some of them voice concerns about possibly getting into trouble with the police for some reason. Suppose then that you could honestly say that you were a close friend of somebody in the Mayor's inner circle. You could say, "Don't worry—I have connections." These early Christians knew Somebody in heaven, Who was one of them, a human being "like us in every respect"(1 Timothy:2:5), as St. Paul could say, Someone Who was on their side, Who had even died for them, and Who could prevent anything bad from happening to them because He was in the innermost center of the Inner Circle, the very Son at the right hand of the Father. So St. John could confidently proclaim that "perfect love casteth out fear"(1John:3:18), and St. Paul could proclaim that "nothing, neither height nor depth nor what has been nor what is to come can separate us from the love of God "(Romans:8:38—39) as mediated through Jesus Christ. They now felt they had nothing to fear.

Well, now that we've thought about *them*, let's get back to *us* as twenty-first-century Gnostics in the Liberal Catholic tradition. What fears are we invited to forsake as we reflect upon and celebrate the Ascension of Our Lord?

We can lay aside any fears concerning our own moral stature or the moral heights to which we may presently or later be called, fears symbolized by the image of going down into the depths or fears symbolized by the image of rising to the heavens.

Anent the former-- fears symbolized by the image of going down into the depths-- we don't have to be afraid of urges, desires, thoughts, etc. inside of ourselves which we don't approve of because they conflict in some way with our moral ideals. We are products of evolution. There is a part of our brain which we share with snakes, a very primitive reptilian brain which reacts with destructive anger at frustrations. We have certain sexual

urges sometimes which it would be inappropriate, sometimes even extremely destructive, for us to express in action. It's been said, indeed, that all of us at times have thoughts which be enough to embarrass the devil. Of course, we would be very shortly in very serious trouble if we acted on every sexual impulse that came our way. And, if we are eating with someone who has bad table manners, we can't, in our irritation, let our reptilian brain take over and grab a fork and thrust it into the person's throat. We can't come right out and say what we would like to see happen to people we don't like or always tell people exactly what we think of them. But those impulses are part of who we are, and God knows who we are and loves us as we are. My late dissertation director, a Jesuit, used to say that God doesn't love some ideal image we have of ourselves and try to present to other people. Those types of images are castles in the air, and God doesn't reside in such castles. We can't unrestrainedly act in accordance with certain parts of ourselves, but we can accept them and even love them and ask God not to root them out but rather to bless them, to integrate whatever good they represent into a balanced, healthy way of living. So Dr. Freud's revelations need not scare us—whatever he and his cohorts, whether his contemporaries or ours, can drudge up, God already knows about that stuff, and in a very special way through the Descent into Hell of Jesus. And, when we confront those things, Jesus is down there with us.

Anent the latter—fears symbolized by the image of rising into the heavens—we need not fear demands that might be made upon us, heights of heroism to which we might be called. We can make it up there because Jesus, Who is one of us, made it up there and He's one of us, and He's up there to give us a helping hand as we ascend and to meet us when we get there. Thus, we can face seemingly impossible challenges with hope and even confidence.

We don't have to be afraid of what will happen to us in the future because of the demands of the Law of Karma or any other aspect of Divine Providence. Many New Age people experience a lot of anxiety over karma that might be in their past and that they might have to face someday. Well, the Lords of Karma can't give us anything to face without the consent of God the Father, and His Son is one of us and our best Friend and always interceding for us at the right hand of the Father. We will not at any given time, we can be confident, be given more than we can face, and we will be given any help we need to get through anything we have to face.

We don't have to be afraid of ghosts or demons or any dark forces. A certain caution is certainly appropriate in regard to the spiritual world, just as in regard to the animal world or the microbiological world. *Genesis* says that everything God made is good, but it doesn't say that everything we can run into is good *for us*. Animals, germs, certain animals, certain people—these can be dangerous to us, and so can certain spirits, so I would not recommend, for example, fooling around with Ouija boards. But many people have an irrational fear of these things, a wildly excessive fear. Spirits are not, strictly speaking, supernatural. Only God is supernatural—spirits are natural beings subject to certain natural laws and certainly subject to the will of God, Who is on our side in Jesus Christ.

Finally, to return to our earlier metaphor, we need not fear that the Lord Christ has agreed to meet us on the roof of the church and in the basement at the price of abandoning us on the main floor. As we live our lives on the physical plane, Jesus is not farther away from us because of the Ascension, but rather closer to us than He could otherwise be. When we imagine that we would be better off if we could see and hear and touch Jesus in the flesh, we are mistaken. The Apostles and other followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry were constantly misunderstanding His message and suffering His rebukes because of their lack of faith. They all abandoned Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but many of them—all of the Apostles except St. John, who died a natural death at an advanced age, courageously suffered martyrdom when He was no longer with them in the flesh. They did not, arguably, understand His message at all until after Pentecost, which Jesus said, could not have occurred without the apparent "loss" of the Ascension. In Chapter 16 of St. John's Gospel, he says, "...it is expedient for you that I depart. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you"(7–8). Jesus could not be fully present to us in the Holy Spirit while He was still with us in the flesh. Why is that?

Part of the answer, I think, is that, during His earthly ministry, His spiritual presence was mediated through, and in a sense diluted by, the particularities of a concrete manifestation in a certain time and space. If we are extremely dehydrated, it is often better for us to drink plain water rather than some soft drink which contains water mixed with other things. People who came into contact with Jesus on earth came into contact with spiritual realities circumscribed by His presence in one place on earth rather than

another, his use of the Aramaic language, the particularities of His personality as mediated by a particular historically conditioned culture, His physical appearance, etc. We through the Eucharist and other sacraments and through the Ascended Christ Within Us have access to a more powerful presence. Jesus, in a sense, at the Ascension, ceases to be somewhere in order to be everywhere. If He were still on earth in human form and we wanted His advice or the experience of His healing presence, so would a lot of other people, so He might be very difficult to contact. But now our Protector and Guide is everywhere. If we are traveling through some frightening domain of experience in life, we need not call the police and wait for the police car to arrive; the police car with our Protector is everywhere, and we are always riding in it. If we are lost in some cave on the first floor of our church, to return to our metaphor, our Guide is inside us, so, ultimately we have nothing to fear.

Alleluia! Our Lord has left us! At His tomb He gave Mary Magdalene the joyous news, which she was to take to us: "I ascend to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God"(John:20:17). He is gone from us! Alleluia! Now we can never be alone!

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