**THE ASCENSION**

Psalm xlvii, verse 5 - *God is gone up with a merry noise, and the LORD with the sound of the trump.*

Many years ago I was very surprised when visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham.  In the Ascension chapel if you look up you will see a pair of plaster feet sticking out of the ceiling, as if our Lord were perpetually stuck on his way through the roof.

The doctrine of the Ascension asserts in part that at one time Jesus was a person living in our world of time and space just as we live in this world; then at a later moment he was no longer in our world in the way he had been and we are in it.  We cannot speak simply about this change without using some spatial terms.  We are limited by human speech and human experience and have to speak of divine things with human terms.  If somebody goes away, he has either died or he has gone up or down, right or left, forward or backward.  We may be vague and say that somebody ‘went away’.  But that still means that he died or went up or down, east or west or north or south.  I think that about exhausts the possibilities.  When Jesus went away at the Ascension the apostles saw him go up.  But that is an inadequate description of what happened, though the inadequacy is inevitable.

In the Creed we say that our Lord ‘ascended into heaven’.  So, where is heaven?  In an earlier day many Christians no doubt naively believed that heaven was quite literally up – up above the visible sky.  ‘Now above the sky he’s King’, as the Easter hymn says.  Likewise, the Ascension hymn by Charles Wesley says, ‘Hail the day that sees him rise, / Glorious to his native skies.’  Some modern Christians find such language implausible, if it is taken literally, and theologians who are silly with sophistication find the Ascension an embarrassment.  It should not be.  So let us boldly ask again:  Where is heaven?  Where did Jesus ascend?  Where is he now?

We might say that heaven is ‘where’ God the Father is, but that doesn’t really help.  God does not have a body, but is ‘without body, parts, or passions’.  Since God does not have a body, he does not have place or position.  God is not somewhere; God simply is.  When Jesus became one of us, he took on a body in a place and a time, which he also resumed at his resurrection.  That body he still has.  It therefore seems that the Ascension is about the humanity of our Lord, which is taken up into the divine.  While the Father is no place and every place equally, Jesus, with his human nature and his body, is some place in particular, which we call heaven.  So, again, where is heaven?  Where did Jesus go at the Ascension?

We can only speculate.  Heaven includes the glorified body of Jesus and of the saints:  but those bodies and that place are not the same as the bodies and places we know now.  That should not disturb us.  Contemporary physics asserts all sorts of extremely weird and wonderful things, at least as speculations.  In a world whose best scientists speculate about matter and antimatter, parallel universes, big bangs and black holes, charms and quarks and bizarre particles and forces, and time running this way and that or not at all – all of which can hardly be spoken about except in mathematical terms far beyond most of us:  in such a world I find nothing implausible or embarrassing about speaking of heaven as an unimaginable place – perhaps a place parallel to and touching us right now in ways we cannot understand.

So let’s sing the good old Ascension hymn with gusto: ‘Hail the day that sees him rise’.  That’s no more naive or improbable than any other possible language about what really matters.  We have to use symbols.  They are all we’ve got.

Let’s even go back a few millennia before Charles Wesley, and hear the Psalmist sing another hymn.  The Psalmist wrote, ‘God is gone up with a merry noise; and the LORD with the sound of the trump.’  We can picture the priests in the temple blasting away with their rams’ horns to celebrate a great festival of Jehovah.  The Psalmist is probably thinking of that, and also of David or some other king rising to his throne while musicians play, and also of God as a kind of thunder-God, rumbling the world.  But the mood of the text is not ominous or fearful.  It is a joyful text, full of uncontainable happiness and merriment.  ‘God is gone up with a merry noise; and the LORD with the sound of the trump’:  the verse rollicks.

Evil and death seemed to triumph over Jesus on Good Friday.  But they did not.  Our Lord has trampled down death by death, and then transcended the limits of our world by his Ascension.  He did not so much leave our world behind, as take the lead in leading our world beyond itself.  He does not abandon us, but rather leads our human nature into a new dimension of life with God. Christianity does not seek to abolish humanity or time.  It does not seek to escape time and space.  Our religion does not say that the world is evil or unreal.  Our religion, rather, says that the world is a vessel, a fragile vessel of time and space, which God is pleased to fill up with delight and immortality and life beyond death.  Christ ‘is gone up with a merry noise’, and where Jesus has gone, in merriness and joy, we may follow.

‘God is gone up with a merry noise; and the LORD with the sound of the trump.’  This verse begs to be turned into an anthem. ‘He who sings well prays twice,’ Saint Augustine said.  Singing keeps the words, but transforms them into something more, a merry noise.  Perhaps this idea of singing a text is itself a fitting emblem of the Ascension.  Our ascended Lord remains what he was, a human being with human body, mind, spirit, and soul.  But now his human nature is more – changed, transformed, lifted up, united with God, and filled with light.  If Christ is the Word of God made flesh, then the Ascension turns that Word into a song and unites our life with the life and energy of God.

By itself the Ascension provides an ending to the story of the gospels, or at least an end to an important chapter of the story.  But it also has a deeper significance.  Its meaning goes beyond history and our world.  The Ascension shows the point of intersection between time and eternity, between history and heaven, between life in this world and the life of the world to come.  Christ came down from heaven, we say, for us men and for our salvation.  He became what we are, ‘like us in all things save sin’, so that we might go where he has gone.  Christ, who was God the Son from all eternity, at a moment in time became one of us.  He became the head of a people, the Church.  Then at his Ascension he took our human nature which he had assumed into eternity, so that where the head has led the way, there the body might follow.  Christ did not put on humanity as we might put on a shirt, only to take it off later on.  Rather he retains his human nature and has taken it up into God’s own inner life.  He did not ascend into heaven just so that the story might have a convenient conclusion.  He ascended into heaven to lead the way for us: so that, as the Preface for the Ascension puts it, ‘where he is, thither we might also ascend, and reign with him in glory’.

At the Ascension the apostles behind two things:  first, our Lord ‘was taken up’; secondly, ‘a cloud received him out of their sight’ (Acts 1:9).  Notice that in both clauses Christ is passive:  he was taken up; a cloud received him.  The Ascension is a kind of coronation, the reception of Christ’s humanity by the Trinity and its enthronement at the right hand of the Father.  The glorious Trinity takes Christ’s humanity nature to the heart of God and receives him up.  Humanity is now crowned with divinity.

This glorification and coronation of humanity is spoken of symbolically when we are told that ‘a cloud received him out of their sight.’  In the Old Testament a cloud is the sign of God’s glorious presence:

            And it came to pass, as Aaron spake unto the whole congregation of the children of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.  (Exodus 16:10)

The cloud is the sign of the *shekinah*, the glory or splendor of God.  When Acts tells us that ‘a cloud received him out of their sight’, it does not just or even primarily mean that Christ went into the sky.  The primary point is that Christ’s humanity was received into the glory of the Godhead.  The glory of God that appeared in ancient time to the children of Israel as cloud and majesty and awe, now appears as that which receives and envelopes the humanity of our risen Head.  The glory of God receives the new Adam, so that all his sons and daughters may have hope.  The glory of God is become our destiny.  Though for a time the cloud ‘received him out of their sight’, the angels come to promise that as he left, so he shall return.  They say, ‘[T]his same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go’.  The glory, in other words, shall return, and then it shall be our glory as well.  It shall be glory for all who have been transformed by the Holy Spirit working in us through prayer and sacrament.  That is the promise of the Ascension and the meaning of the cloud.

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