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## THE ASCENSION

"I ascend unto my Father" (John xx. 17).

CHRIST'S humiliation and His exaltation form the twofold theme of the New Testament story. The two are brought together by Paul:

"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. ii. 6-11).

Very early in His ministry, our Saviour spoke of His ascension to heaven even as He did of His death on the Cross and His resurrection. "No man hath ascended up to heaven but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven" (John iii. 13, and compare John i. 51). The exaltation began on the resurrection morning and was fully manifested forty days later before the very eyes of the disciples, when His own words to Mary Magdalene were fulfilled: "I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John xx. 17).

The account of the ascension is recorded in Mark, in Luke and in the Acts. It is an historic fact to these writers. It is also alluded to in Old Testament prophecy and proclaimed as an established fact in the Epistles and the book of the Revelation (Eph. iv. 9; Rev. i. 17). Following the Scriptures, Christian art has represented the glory of the ascension in the presence of angels (Acts i. 10, 11). Tradition tells us that Luke was not only a physician but an artist, and it is his pen that records the vision of angels at the tomb and their presence at Christ's ascension.

Four great artists have painted the scene as it appealed to their imagination; that of Perugino (1446-1523) can be seen at Lyons; that of Tintoretto at Venice and a celebrated painting

by Veronese at Leningrad. Correggio, the name given to Antonio Allegri (1494-1534), an Italian painter, began his famous fresco of the "Ascension of Christ" (on the cupola of the Benedictine Church of San Giovanni in Parma) in 1521 and finished it in 1524. In the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue, New York, there is a more modern but beautiful painting of the Ascension by John La Farge covering the entire apse dome. It represents the eleven disciples with Mary, the mother of Jesus, gazing upward at the ascending, majestic figure of our Lord, while two angels in the foreground seem to say: "Why stand ye gazing up? . . . this same Jesus shall so come in like manner." The artist has expressed with marvellous colours the ecumenic faith of the Church in this stupendous miracle—"He ascended into heaven".

Those who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and explain away the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances have naturally no faith in His ascension. The creeds are to them empty songs of an ancient credulity.<sup>1</sup>

But the Feast of the Ascension, forty days after Easter, is mentioned by St. Augustine as having been kept from time immemorial and as probably instituted by the apostles. Chrysostom mentions its celebration in a church outside Antioch, and Socrates (*Hist. Eccles.* vii. 26) records that in the year 390 all the people of Constantinople celebrated it with great pomp.

What the Church down the ages has taught in her ecumenic creeds and catechisms regarding the ascension of Christ and His session on God's right hand until He comes to judge the living and the dead, is known to all. The Scriptural testimony is well summarized by Bishop John Pearson in his *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*:

"We may conclude, therefore, what every Christian is obliged to confess in those words of our Creed, *he ascended into heaven*; for thereby he is understood to express this much: I am fully persuaded that the only-begotten and eternal Son of God, after he rose from the dead, did with the same soul and body with which he rose, by a true and local translation convey himself from the earth on which he lived, through all the regions of the air, through all the celestial orbs, until he came into the heaven of heavens, the most glorious presence of the Majesty of God. And thus I believe in Jesus Christ *who ascended into heaven*."

It is this faith in a stupendous fact, this acceptance of God's Word at its face value, which is ever a stumbling-block to the

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Wm. Pepperell Montague in *Liberal Theology: An Appraisal* (New York 1942), pp. 157-160.

unbeliever and foolishness to the man of this world. But we cannot escape the plain meaning of Luke, who tells us in his prologue that he had the facts from eye-witnesses, and who, both in his gospel and in the book of Acts, describes the startling miracle of Christ's departure from this planet into space. The entrance and the exit of Jesus Christ into and out of human history, could not be anything else than miraculous. His birth was not according to the laws of nature. His rising from the grave was against the laws of nature. His ascension, likewise, transcended the laws of gravitation to which we are subject. But He is the Lord of creation. "All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John i. 3). "By Him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible . . . and he is before all things and by him all things consist" (Col. i. 16, 17). He created the starry universe and every atom is witness to His eternal power and godhead. Is anything too hard for such a Saviour? Or to a generation that trembles at the smashing of an atom-bomb?

In one of our great hymns (which we sing so thoughtlessly), Christ's ascension glory is expressed in these lines:

"Crown Him the Lord of years,  
The Potentate of time;  
Creator of the rolling spheres,  
Ineffably sublime."

Some have stumbled at the simplicity of the ascension but that, too, is its glory. He blessed the disciples after giving the great commission and then, as they beheld Him, He was taken up and a cloud hid the glory which is referred to in the Old Testament. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty . . . the LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory" (Ps. xxiv. 7-10). "The chariots of God [not like the *one* fiery chariot of Elijah] are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels; the Lord is among them as in Sinai in the holy place. Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive; thou hast received gifts for men, yea for the rebellious also that the Lord God might dwell among them" (Ps. lxxviii. 17, 18). Both of these passages were interpreted by the early Church as prophetic of the Ascension. There is a third, rather obscure, passage in which the Jews

themselves interpret "The Breaker" as a title of the Messiah. They paraphrase: "When shall we rejoice? When the captives shall ascend from Hades, and Shechinah at the head, as it is written (Micah ii. 13): 'Their King shall pass before them and the LORD at the head of them.'" <sup>1</sup>

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews finds a reference to Christ's ascension and His session at God's right hand in the typology of the Tabernacle (Lev. xvi. 2): "Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God for us" (Heb. x. 24). Thus both typology and prophecy cast their shadows before regarding the coming event of Christ's ascension.

Let us now turn to the account in the Acts. Nowhere in the Bible is this event described more fully. Jesus met with His disciples (Acts i. 4-8) and gave His command not to depart from Jerusalem until they had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, after which they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. "After he had spoken thus, he was taken up as they beheld, and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold two men stood by them in white apparel, which also said, 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?' . . ." That these messengers were angels is evident from their sudden appearance, their raiment and their heavenly message. Christ left the disciples with a great Commission; the angels gave them the great Promise of His return: "This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

The cloud (so often connected with theophanies in the Old Testament) divided the Ascension into two stages. As Lange, the commentator, remarks:

"The gradual elevation of the Lord from the earth, until a cloud came and received Him out of their sight, was visible to the apostles then present. The ascension of the Lord into heaven, the true taking up into the heavenly glory, was invisible. This was testified to the disciples by the angels, as also the Lord Himself had foretold it to them before His sufferings (John xiv). Since His resurrection, Jesus, during the forty days, had appeared frequently to His disciples; but every time He vanished as suddenly, and as unobserved to their senses, as He appeared (Luke xxiv. 23). But at this time He granted to His

<sup>1</sup> References are given to *Bereshith Rabba* on Gen. xlv. 18 in Pearson *On the Creed*, p. 481. The context of Micah ii. 13 is assuredly Messianic.

assembled apostles a clear and calm view as He went towards heaven, to give them, as His eye-witnesses, as far as that was possible, absolute certainty that He belongs no more to earth, and dwells no more upon it; but that, after all things were accomplished, He has gone to His Father."

His priestly, sacrificial, work on earth was ended. He was now to enter within the veil to intercede, to send the Holy Spirit and, as Forerunner, carrying the affections of all His people, to become the centre of the Church triumphant in glory (Heb. x. 11-13).

The mystery of the Ascension must not obscure for us its reality and its deep significance. The broken, bruised body of Jesus disappeared from the tomb. He appeared in His perfect resurrection body and "by many infallible proofs" to the eye, the ear, the very touch of His beloved disciples, He was recognised. And then after forty days they themselves saw the incarnate Son of God, whom they knew as the Son of Man, ascend to the Father.

John Donne is only one of the many who have sought to interpret the Ascension in poetry:

"Salute the last and everlasting day,  
 Joy at th' uprising of this Sun, and Son,  
 Ye whose true tears, or tribulation  
 Have purely wash'd, or burnt your drossy clay.  
 Behold, the Highest, parting hence away,  
 Lightens the dark clouds, which He treads upon;  
 Nor doth He by ascending *show* alone,  
 But first He, and He first, *enters* the way."

And we have a clearer note in Charles Wordsworth's hymn:

"While He raised His hands in blessing,  
 He was parted from His friends  
 While their eager eyes behold Him,  
 He upon the clouds ascends;  
 He who walked with God and pleased Him,  
 Preaching truth and doom to come,  
 He, our Enoch, is translated,  
 To His everlasting home."

While Charles Wesley gives his interpretation thus:

"Lo! the heaven its Lord receives,  
 Yet He loves the earth He leaves;  
 Though returning to His throne,  
 Still He calls mankind His own.  
 Alleluia!"

Our credal statement reads: "He ascended into heaven and *sitteth* on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." But

in the Acts we read of His *rising* to welcome the first martyr, Stephen! "He being full of the Holy Ghost looked up steadfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God; and said 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God'" (Acts vii. 55, 56). As Tennyson puts it:

"He heeded not reviling tones,  
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,  
Though cursed and scorned, and bruised with stones;

"But looking upward, full of grace,  
He prayed, and from a happy place  
God's glory smote him on the face."

We read of many others martyred for the Truth who in their final hour saw the glory of their Risen and Ascended Redeemer. Patrick Hamilton was the first martyr of the Scottish Reformation and was burned to death at St. Andrews in 1528.

"On the scaffold [writes the historian] he turned affectionately to his servant, who had long attended him, and taking off his gown, coat, and cap, bade him receive all the worldly goods now left him to bestow, and with them the example of his death. 'What I am about to suffer, my dear friend', said he, 'appears fearful and bitter to the flesh; but remember, it is the entrance to everlasting life which none shall possess who deny their Lord.' In the midst of his torments, which, from the awkwardness of the executioner, were protracted and excruciating, he ceased not to exhort those who stood near, exhibiting a meekness and unaffected courage which made a deep impression. Lifting up his eyes to heaven, he exclaimed, 'How long, O Lord, shall darkness cover this kingdom? How long wilt Thou suffer this tyranny of men?' and when death at last came to his relief, he expired with these blessed words on his lips, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'."<sup>1</sup>

A similar beatific vision of our Lord after His ascension is related regarding John Donne on his death-bed. The details are given by his friend Izaak Walton.<sup>2</sup> And may we not believe that all those, and they are many, who down the centuries in the ecstasy of love or in the solemn hour of death have caught such vision of the Christ, are witnesses both to His resurrection and His ascension glory by such experience?

For, to paraphrase Paul's words (Eph. iv. 7-13), unto every Christian is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. The One who ascended up on high and led captive a host of captives (Weymouth) and gave gifts unto men, is none other than he who descended first to our lowly earth from

<sup>1</sup> Patrick F. Tytler, *History of Scotland*, Vol. V., p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker and George Herbert* (London, 1670), p. 100.

highest heaven. In his exaltation after his resurrection he ascended far above all heavens to fill the universe (Weymouth). And this glorious ascension had deepest significance for the Church in spiritual gifts bestowed. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers—all these were the gracious gift of Christ, our Head, to His body, the Church, for the perfecting of the saints and for the work of the ministry, until we all of us arrive at oneness in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and at mature manhood and the stature of full-grown men in Christ (Weymouth).

In spite of the many exegetical difficulties of this glorious passage,<sup>1</sup> all are agreed that it is *after* the Ascension and *because* of the Ascension that Christ bestows this lavish love and these heavenly gifts and graces on His Church. Has that Church in our day given due recognition to the fact and the faith of His Ascension?

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<sup>1</sup> They are given in detail in the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. III., pp. 323-327.