

Lessons From the Ascension

St. John xvi. 28 *I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.*

At the Ascension of our Lord, that event we call the Incarnation came to its end. Our focus on the many aspects of this event began with the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary of the her coming conception of the Christ Child:

Luke 1: 28b: Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. 29 And when she saw [the angel], she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. 30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. 31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

The physical impossibility of such an occurrence dumfounded her: *34: Then said Mary unto the angel: How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?* Mary, was the first recipient, in all her simplicity and virtue, of that news which the hearts and minds of all subsequent generations have labored to worshipfully and reverently understand: “God will become man”:

vs.35: And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

Nine months hence she met in person and held in her arms the very One who had been promised to her: *And she brought forth her firstborn son... (2:7a)*. Surely she was aware of the full identity of this Child over whom she and her husband Joseph had been given such responsibility, for the prophet had said long before:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. (Micah 5:2)

The same wonder-filled questions must have filled her heart that preoccupy us all: How could the infinite magnificence of God compress itself into the frail vessel of mortal flesh? Why would the One who exists above all sin and suffering choose to immerse Himself in it?

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us... proclaims the Christmas Gospel.

St. Paul summed up the Incarnation in this short and wonderful hymn:

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)

During His adult ministry, Jesus never stinted in proclaiming this matter of His preexistence. To an amazed Nicodemus He said: *..no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven (Jn. 3:13)*. Why did He come? Jesus continued: *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through*

his might be saved (Jn. 3:17). God sent his Son. He directed Him to come here. Christ's bitterest opponents received the full force of His strongest self-identifying statements:

...my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world... I am the bread of life. (Jn. 6:32b, 33, 35a) ...For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. (vs. 38) The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? (41-42) [Then Jesus said unto them...] As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. (53, 57) What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? (64).

These statements passed all bounds. No one could dare utter such things, unless he were insane, or a blasphemer. But the greatest of all pronouncements of this sort was yet to come:

Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. (8:42)... Then said the Jews unto Him... Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself? (53) Jesus answered,... Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him... (56-59)

I am...: "I have always existed. I am eternal, having no beginning, nor any ending. I have voluntarily entered time and allowed Myself to be bound by it. Although I am unlimited, I have submitted myself to all that this world wishes to do with Me and to Me, without placing any limits upon it":

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 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 (p'p. 2:5-8).

That is St. Paul's glorious recapitulation of our Lord's ministry.

But the time for His departure has arrived. His work has been accomplished. He has done the Father's will. His visible life upon earth, which began with His birth in Bethlehem many years before, was about to be ended. His sacrifice for the sins of the whole world has been accomplished. His resurrection from the dead to grant eternal life to all who will believe had just occurred. To have retained Him here any longer would have been to make impossible the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit upon the Church. He ascends to His throne both Victor and Conqueror, for *the Prince of this world has been judged*, and the grave has failed to possess Him. He awaits the consummation of His labors upon earth: *For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet...The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet (1 Cor. 15:26, 27).*

But He also ascends having undergone a permanent change. His sojourn here has left its mark upon Him, not only in the form of the scars of His atoning death, which He chooses to perpetually bear, but in the manhood He has chosen to assume. For once having been "made man",

He never ceases to be man. Having taken upon Himself the robes of humanity through birth, He yet retains the features of race, of genealogy, of that common ancestry in which we all have a share. He truly has become one of us, and voluntarily remains one of us.

His Ascension triumphantly proclaims the absolute perfection of that original plan of the Incarnation, for everything happened according to the Father's will, even and especially the chaos, confusion, and darkness that were released without measure against Him at His crucifixion. What lesson can you and I carry away with us because of this?

As His adopted child, we have been possessed by Christ. He hasn't just taken in the nice things about us, the pleasant, the acceptable, the perfect things about us, and turned His nose up at all the rest. No, He has made Himself responsible for every detail of our past, present, and future, and committed Himself to being our Redeemer. He wants to show us that His creative power knows no bounds. We simply cannot ultimately stay His hand. He *will* emerge triumphant from the battle He wages to save us, and transform our lives into what we've always hoped they would be, but never dared to believe they could be. Just as His own Incarnation, at the time of His Ascension, was now a completely finished work, so will our lives be, when the moment for their conclusion has arrived.

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father. So utterly simple, and yet reason for unending worship.

8 And ... the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. 9 And they sung a new song, saying... thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; 10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. 11 And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; 12 Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. 13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. 14 And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever. (From Revelation chapter 5)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.