

THE SCHOOL OF WONDER

May 2016

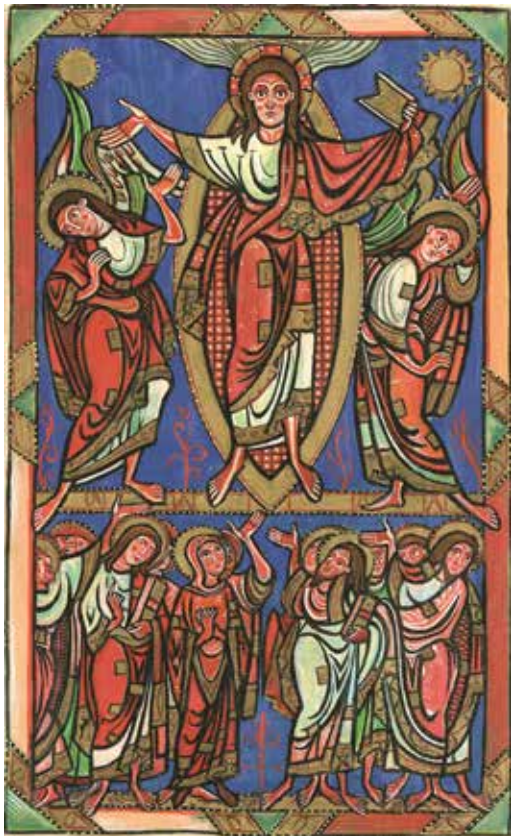
Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

When angels ask questions—especially of human beings—they do not engage in idle chatter, but open their ‘lips,’ so to speak, only in order to communicate something of great importance on behalf of the divine majesty. As we read in the Book of Judges, when an angel had announced to Manue and his wife that the latter would give birth to a son, which is to say to Samson, Manue asked him his name. “Why askest thou my name,” replied the angelic messenger, “which is wonderful?”¹ On Easter morning, to take another example, when the holy women encountered two angels at the empty tomb, they were asked quite directly, “Why seek you the living with the dead?” The question of these spiritual ambassadors was meant, in fact, to bring the frightened handmaids of the Lord into the realization of the Resurrection. These higher beings are

obliged to use a form of spiritual pedagogy in order to help us slower creatures raise our minds, step by step, to things that are normally beyond the scope of man’s reasoning.

Thus it is too, at the moment of Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, the mystery we celebrated a few weeks ago. There is great wonder in the minds of the Apostles as the Lord is lifted up beyond the clouds. “Ye men of Galilee, why stand you looking up to heaven?”² The word “wonder” is not found in the text of the Book of Acts, but the holy liturgy adds it in the text of the Introit, in order to make explicit what is implicit in the words of Holy Scripture: “Ye men of Galilee, why wonder you, looking up to heaven?” The Ascension is a thing of wonder, a miracle worthy of our admiration and deep reflection. How could it happen that a physical body be raised so quickly, defying the ordinary laws of nature as we know them (or think we know them), moving beyond the very clouds?

The experience of wonder was well known to the Greeks before the time of Christ, when a great culture of philosophy was developing. Aristotle taught that it was wonder that first impelled men to examine the universe with their minds, to engage in what we call “philosophy,” searching



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for the explanation, the causes of things. That state of mind was a natural ladder that allowed human-kind to climb toward the divine. It is still with us today, especially in the very young and the very old.

It would seem, however, that the wonder of the Apostles at the moment of the Ascension was a specifically supernatural sort of wonder, as these men had already been touched by grace and received the gift of faith. Their wonder—like ours as Christians—had to be of a different nature than that of the Greek philosophers, although not entirely different. As with the wonder of the philosophers, this supernatural wonder is a kind of presentiment of a greatness hiding behind the appearances, a fear of a greatness whose effects are known but which remains unseen. The difference here—and it is immense—lies in the fact that the Christian has already begun to participate in a real way in the very life of God: his or her wonder expects a revelation of the highest of all causes, the very vision of the Creator.

Some of the great monastic spiritual masters and theologians have spoken of this supernatural wonder in relation to contemplation. “The first and greatest form of contemplation,” says Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, “is wonder before [God’s] majesty.” The same Mellifluous Doctor, in his famous Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles, likens the sound of the voice of the Bridegroom, Christ, to this sentiment of supernatural wonder.

Show me your face, let your voice sound in my ears (Cant. 2:14). This voice is the wonder in the mind of the contemplative, this voice is the giving of thanks.³

No doubt, one of the challenges of active adult life, during that period between childhood and old age, is to find the time to wonder. The Apostles were in a kind of ecstasy following the Ascension of the Lord. They were, for a moment, drawn out of the daily struggle of work and of providing for a family. They were given a pause from their normal existence and caught up in the mounting mystery of the Lord returning to His Father. We too should allow ourselves to be taken apart from our hustle and bustle from time to time, in order to remember and wonder at the most important things of life, the reality Jesus referred to when he said to the busy housewife, Martha, “Martha, Martha, thou art careful, and art troubled about many things: but one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her.”⁴

If nothing else, an openness to the wonder, even just as a natural state of mind, could help us climb out of the quagmire of the all too human passions and petty problems that encumber our daily existence. It so refreshing to gain perspective on the direction and meaning of our lives—if only for a fleeting moment! On a higher plane, a supernatural sense of wonder can be the prelude to the highest calling of the Christian soul, the antechamber of the greatest of graces.

May the grace of the Ascension teach us spiritual childhood, for the Kingdom belongs to those alone who are capable of wonder.

+ br. Philip Anderson, abbot

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P.S. If you have not yet seen our new website, please view at the following link the page dealing with our current construction project: clearcreekmonks.org/construction We greatly appreciate your help during this great effort to lift our monastic church Heavenward.