

+ Ascension

May 13, 2021

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My Very Dear Sons,

The solemn but simple words of the evangelist Saint Mark that we just read tell us little more than just the essential fact of the Lord's Ascension into Heaven: "And the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them [about the preaching of the Gospel to the entire world], was taken up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God."¹ The Book of Acts adds some details, speaking of a cloud that hid Him from their sight and a vision of Angels: "And while they were beholding him going up to heaven, behold, two men [Angels] stood by them [the Apostles] in white garments, who also said : 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand you looking up to heaven? This Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come as you have seen him going into heaven.'"² However, the mystery remains, and it is a deep one—or, perhaps we should say, a high one.

That a man should be taken up to heaven is extraordinary enough. It was said that Romulus, the founder of Rome, was taken by his father, Mars, to heaven, but that is a pagan myth. In the Book of Genesis we read that Enoch, the ancestor of Noah, "walked with God: and he was no more; for God took him."³ This is interpreted as meaning that he was gathered up, while still alive, into the presence of God. The departure from this world of the prophet Elijah was even more dramatic. It occurred as Elijah and his disciple Elisha were on the way to Gilgal. "As they were walking along and talking together," we read, "suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, 'My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!' And Elisha saw him no more."⁴ These are the extraordinary endings of great and holy men, but it is said, neither of Enoch, nor of Elijah that he "sitteth on the right hand of God." Our Lord, Jesus, is more than a prophet. He is the proper Son of God, a Divine Person, one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, while being distinct from them in Person. He is the Divine Person, who, having become Incarnate, can sit on a throne, and whose dignity puts Him on the right hand of God.

Our age is utterly allergic to anything transcendent, anything out of this world, unless it be, perhaps, science fiction or fantasy. Also, biblical scholars in our day often prefer to underline all that has to do with the *human nature* of Christ, rather than dwell on His divinity. This question of accent, of sometimes underlining the humanity of Christ, is not necessarily a bad thing, but without the Divine Nature of Christ, without the supernatural in general, there is nothing left of Christ's humanity, nothing left of Christianity, and nothing—really—left of Christian civilization. One English philosopher poses the terms rather clearly:

Ever since men were able to think, they have been wondering about what this universe really is and how it came to be there. And, very roughly, two views have been held.

¹ Mark 16:19.

² Acts 1:9-11.

³ Genesis 5:24.

⁴ II Kings 2:12.

First, there is what is called the materialist view. People who take that view think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter...just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think.... The other view is the religious view. According to it, what is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is anything else we know. That is to say, it is conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another.... And on this view, it made the universe.⁵

It requires supernatural, theological Faith to enter into the mystery of the Ascension: we could not begin to open our minds to this final act of the mystery of Christ on earth without the light of God transmitted to us through grace. But there is another virtue, another theological virtue, that corresponds very closely with this upward movement of the Lord: that of Hope. Through Hope we lean on God, so to speak, in order to complete our journey of Faith toward the same God. By Hope in the Ascension, we travel spiritually with the Lord in His ascent to the Father. Christ is the head of His Mystical Body. Where our head is we too are in a certain manner. After the Ascension we already have an anchor in the Kingdom to come.

Wherein God, meaning more abundantly to show to the heirs of the promise the immutability of his counsel, interposed an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have the strongest comfort, who have fled for refuge to hold fast the hope set before us. Which we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm, and which entereth in even within the veil; Where the forerunner Jesus is entered for us, made a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedech.⁶

Do you seek a way out of the mire of human entanglements and sin, a way up from the pit that absorbs ever more people in the world in our day, leading them to Hell? Cling to the Lord with the desperate courage of the drowning man and follow Him to higher ground. Do you grieve to see the ones you love—especially the young, as they face tremendous challenges—floundering about without being able to get a foothold? Encompass them about with your prayer and your sacrifices, offering them to the Risen Lord, the Prince of Peace as He returns to His eternal kingdom.

It has been said that everything that rises must converge⁷ and that the law of natural things is that of gravity, of downward attraction. Grace alone causes things to rise and converge.⁸ Everything that does not rise eventually descends into the mud, into the destruction of its nature and of its beauty—finally into disintegration. The grace of God and especially the mystery of the Ascension raises us to the Kingdom of the great vision, the towering beauty of God. God, you see, had a trick, one balancing act defying gravity: He alone was able to descend with the grace and lightness of the Incarnation, into the mud of our fallen humanity, in order then, following the Passion and Resurrection, to ascend to Heaven, taking us with Him. That is the spiritual itinerary we must follow, the itinerary of the good Angels, the one the Blessed Virgin followed by the grace of her Son. “God is ascended in jubilee, and the Lord with the sound of the trumpet.”⁹ Amen. Alleluia.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Maximillian, 1952) pp. 51-52.

⁶ Hebrews 6:18-20.

⁷ Flannery O’Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

⁸ Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*.

⁹ Offertory of this feast’s Mass.