

The Sunday after the Ascension

I Peter 4:7ff

John 15 & 16

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen+

A few months ago an email arrived with a picture of the English priest and musician, Percy Dearmer, who was a major collaborator with Ralph Vaughn Williams in renewing hymnody. The image in black and white showed Dearmer, with a forlorn look on his face, sitting at a desk with an open book in front of him and an empty writing tablet. The caption simply read, "There has got to be a sermon in here somewhere"! Many will confess to that experience.

Stephen Hawking, the astrophysicist, told the story of a young scientist who was asked to visit a small village in the English countryside in order to give a lecture on the origins of the universe. The little hall was filled and the man began by explaining what is known as the 'Big Bang' Theory (no, not the TV program) and how the cosmos came into being and was now expanding rapidly. He described the formation of our solar system and the sun, when a hand in the audience went up. The lady did not ask a question but simply said, "well, young man, all of that is fine and well, but we know that the earth rides across the sky on the back of a giant turtle. It is as good an explanation as your science." (it is an old Indian story) The scientist was stunned and for a moment pondered and then asked, "Madame, just what does this turtle rest upon?" She responded, "Very clever, sir, very clever, but it's turtles all the way down." In many ways that story encompasses the tensions of our time and culture. On one hand he Christian faith is seen as absurd or at least an outmoded way of viewing the world, and on the other we have succumbed to living life without reference to the transcendent. We do not expect God to be part of life and rather than to look there for meaning we look to the immanent, utilitarian, and now primarily to the material world. The divine seems eerily absent.

Today is the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension. It is, in several senses a pivotal day like a door hinge. For one it is the end of the first half of the church year. We will move from reflecting on the events of Christ's life, our redemption, and in fact who Christ is now, to what the Church calls; Ordinary Time. That is, we transition to considering what those events and this person mean for us as we live and travel through what may appear to be mundane life. It is also a challenge, because it is about absence and presence-- What does the Collect/Prayer of the Day say? "We beseech thee, leave us not comfortless; but send us your Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us to the same place where our Savior Christ is gone before". There is a double meaning here which should not elude us. It is not mere fantasy or escaping this world—NO—rather it is living in this world as Christ has done; as a servant people who bear witness to the power of selfless love in a world that sees power and exaltation as a means of manipulation and self-aggrandizement. Life for us is marked by starting and stopping, beginnings and endings, but today we are told there is more in life than those referent points. We are asked to consider from what perspective we will come to see ourselves and what will guide us along the various paths we will walk.

The Ascension also suggests God is not confined to the finite or to the past, but also holds the future. Let me remind you that ascension has a double meaning in the N.T. Jesus tells his disciples, "I, when I am lifted up, WILL draw all to myself". In referring to his ultimate sacrifice on the cross as ascension, he claims the future is his as well, and that he has put an ultimate stamp on life in

this world-love which the world cannot control. This dynamic tension may well be a clue to seeing why it is really crucial for us. We are being asked to shed our blinders and see something greater than just a past event—to see the present in light of the future.

The author of I Peter says, “The end of all things is at hand”. What meaning are we to glean from that word, END? It often signifies reaching a closure or finish beyond which nothing exists. After all, we do not continue to play a game after it has ended!! But another way of hearing it would suggest that the end really points to the achieving of a purpose; a culmination which has effects that are ongoing, lasting, and make a qualitative difference for those touched by it. I suggest to you that the Ascension is just such an ending, and like a mirror at the end of a hallway reflects its light back on those looking at it. It is an ending that really is a beginning. We no longer merely look to the past, but to this end to direct us.

Let's play a brief ethical game that may well demonstrate this. You are a physician heading up an experimental drug program seeking to cure a deadly disease. You have been given carte blanche to do whatever is necessary to develop a treatment regime having the potential to save thousands of lives. Money will be no roadblock. After years of trial and error in the lab you now have at your disposal a medication that may be the turning point. It must now be tried on human subjects. There will be no lack of persons willing to participate in the initial trials. However, there is a slight snag. You and a limited number of your team know that the drug is dangerous, and that the mortality rate on those being tested will approach 50% or more until the kinks are worked out. Most of those being tested would live another 4-5 years anyway, but you need test subjects. The participants do not know the full extent of the risks. Is the end result worth the cost? What would you do?

Now, let's go back and run that exact same situation a second time with only one variation. In this scenario all conditions remain the same except that you tell all the participants the truth. They know in advance what the odds of survival are, and yet now they choose to be part of the experiment because they know their actions have the potential of not only saving their lives, but the lives of countless others who will come after them. They are aware that even in the face of dying there will be an ongoing impact and that foreknowledge colors their willingness to participate.

What are the differences between these two settings? Yes, there is honesty in the second that is not present in the first. But there is something more than that. In the second those tested make a choice, and that choice is based on the belief that the end is not just an end, but also a beginning. The end does not justify the means, rather the end offers something beyond itself—hope. That knowledge colors the actions of sacrifice and makes them worthy of the name. Every soldier going into battle understands that kind of sacrifice. It is an ultimate gift that transcends endings and offers new beginnings.

Now go back and look at Jesus' words, “I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself”. Look at I Peter's claim, “The end of all things is at hand, therefore know that charity (Love) is the deciding gift from God that alters how the world looks, even when it seems terribly dark.

Herman Melville, the 19th century author, used the image of the vastness of the stormy sea to depict this sense of things we cannot manipulate or overcome. Anyone who has ever stood on the North Carolina coast and witnessed storms rolling and churning the ocean has a visual of Melville's point. In his great novel, *Moby Dick*, he unfolds the story of this eternal battle to come

to terms with forces beyond our management. Ahab, the protagonist of the book, is a man driven to conquer that which haunts him, the great white whale. He has been wounded by this denizen of life, and his unwillingness to face his limits and a prideful unbending pursuit frightens all who come into his sphere of influence. In a very poignant scene Ahab, standing on the foredeck of his ship, looks down on a fearful and confused crew who are ready to do mutiny. Everything seems to be slipping out of his hands, and recognizing this fact he declares, **“a man needs to feel something in this slippery world that holds”**. In these few words Melville describes a reality that all of us here today understand at some level of our being do we not? To call the world a slippery place is not foreign to us. It is an apt description of what most of us here have experienced.

That is but one side of our story. Ahab also gives voice to another reality, even though he does so unwittingly. He reminds us that we need to feel something that HOLDS; that is something that lasts and can be trusted. It is not merely something that we can grasp, but rather SOMEONE who grasps us!! Someone in whose clasp we can trust and in whose holding we can find security and assurance when all our own efforts come up short, which they inevitably will. We need to be encountered by One who stands in the midst of this fragile life, knows full well the threats we feel, and who can remind us these things are not the final word about us. The Ascension is about Christ who wants to remain connected intimately to us no matter where our journey goes!!

We celebrate the Ascension of Christ, not merely as an historical event once done, but as an ongoing reality that the love God has for us has been made his final disposition toward us. We do not merely look back at it, but it continues to put a tint on the way our lives look. It holds us to the truth that God is not limited to time and space as we are, and that we need not fear our own limitations. St. Aelred of Rievaulx (English Monk) wrote, *“The Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world, reaching from end to end, and delicately disposing everything...”* We need not live in the past, in despair, in the futility of materialism, but in God's future and God's grasp. Amen+