

A short time ago a good friend sent me a link to an article in *The Catholic World Report* of May 14th. It was about the Ascension and the writer was pointing out how cumbersome the traditional idea of the Ascension can be. He says:

“There is something about the Ascension that is inconceivable, even for a miracle—something that is almost *too* fabulous about the idea and image of Jesus ‘flying.’ For those who stumble over the Ascension, there is often an aspect of mythical fantasy or primitive whimsy involved in accepting such a thing. Can people really take seriously the account of a Man floating into the clouds? Is the Ascension worth the risk of alienating those influenced by a cynical realism?”

He goes on, quite rightly, to insist on the corporality of the event, the physicality of it, the fact that even after his resurrection, the Lord Jesus was no ghost, but a living man of flesh and blood. The gospel resurrection appearances all stress this: Thomas came touch his wounds and he eats grilled fish with his disciples. This emphasis is, I should imagine, firstly to prove that it was the same Lord and Master they had known when he was with them – in other words, he was *recognisably* himself; and secondly to affirm that he was not some immaterial phantom – again in other words, he was *truly* himself. I think it’s also helpful to remember that a great many Hebrews at that time had no real belief in an afterlife – the Sadducees positively denied it – so for them it was either Jesus or it was an illusion. The gospel accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances seek to make quite clear that he was no illusion. On the other hand, St Paul, writing at an earlier date than any of the gospels, has very little interest in Jesus’ resurrected body, except to say that it is not a ‘this-worldly’

one: in his Letter to the Philippians he describes how the resurrected Christ is exalted in a new body utterly different from one he had when he wore 'the appearance of a man.' Paul's understanding of the resurrected Lord is a *mystical* one; this isn't really surprising when you think that Paul never actually met Jesus during his lifetime but, instead, encountered him in an extraordinary and overwhelming vision.

The article in *The Catholic World Report* is headed 'Can We Simply Drop the Ascension Story?' The short answer of course is no, we can't – and this is the conclusion the writer quite properly comes to. But I think he does so for the wrong reasons.

He says: "The Ascension confirms and completes the Resurrection in a way that goes beyond mere symbolism." It's quite true that the Ascension confirms and completes the resurrection, but there is no such thing as 'mere symbolism'. Would you look at the wedding ring on your partner's hand and tell yourself: 'Oh, that's a mere symbol'? No, of course not: it is loaded with, wrapped in and contains so many joyful memories, associations, so much commitment to love, to the supreme importance in your life of another person – and a great deal more besides – that it is a *carrier of meaning*. That's what a symbol does: it carries meaning. A little later on the writer of the article contradicts himself when he says: 'People need solid symbols and signs.' And he also confuses symbols with signs – and they are absolutely not the same.

The gospel accounts of the Lord's resurrection are just such carriers of meaning. This does *not* mean that they are *merely* something or other, it simply suggests that the deepest and richest way to understand the Ascension as a physical event is to look it through a symbolic lens; this doesn't lessen

its physicality, but, rather, elevates and dignifies it. Problems only arise when we limit the Ascension to *only and nothing more than* a physical event. The symbolic approach prevents this theological myopia. Where the head has gone the body hopes to follow and, like Christ's surely, our resurrected bodies – as St Paul affirms – will be 'utterly different;' to the way they are now. We can never properly comprehend much of this mystery in any case... but we can hope, believe and trust.

For those of us who "stumble over the Ascension" the writer of the article says that our error is to see it as some kind of 'mythical fantasy'; but that phrase contradicts itself. Myth is never fantasy but always psychological reality. The Ascension does indeed confirm and complete the Resurrection, but in a more profound and primordial way than the article suggests. There is something deep in the human soul that responds to myth: a myth is not a fable or a childish story; it expresses some deep universal truth that cannot be understood in any other way. The Roman writer Sallust said: "A myth did not necessarily happen – but it is always and everywhere true." This was C.S. Lewis' conundrum, which his friend J. R. Tolkien solved with one short sentence. Lewis had been raised a Belfast Protestant, but had drifted into atheism. He used to discuss Christianity a lot with Tolkien – especially in the pub – and stated his conviction that the life and death of Jesus was 'only a myth' and he likened it to all the world myths of the descending, dying and ascending god: Osiris in ancient Egypt, Baldr in Norse legends, Adonis and Dionysus in Greece, and so on. Tolkien immediately replied: "Yes; and in Jesus Christ the myth became a man." This is the marvel of it, Tolkien thought: the myth became a man *without ceasing to be a myth*, so that its eternal significance goes far beyond its in-time historical

manifestation. Lewis returned to Christianity but, much to Tolkien's irritation, it was the Protestantism of his youth.

The great drama of Jesus' descent from heaven, his death, resurrection and his ascension back to where he came, is perpetually celebrated in the great feasts of the Church's liturgical year: Christmas preceded by Advent, Holy Week preceded by Lent and Pentecost preceded by Eastertide. Yet in the eternal realm this drama is also the story of our soul – the soul of each one of us – because we too have descended to earth, we live and will die and, through faith in Christ, we will rise and ascend to the Father. We come into this world to learn how to love; there is no other reason for the drama than this: to learn how to love the Source of all love from which we came, and how to serve that Source in and through love of our fellow creatures. I say 'creatures' deliberately because we cannot limit our love to human beings – St Francis taught us that – but it is a lesson – even after so much time – that humankind is still learning with shocking and painful slowness.

Like Jesus we die: not with his terrible Passion and not for the salvation of the world, but nevertheless we die; we shall each have to endure our own passion – perhaps several – but they will not be abysmal, like his. After death, we ascend to the heavenly kingdom of the Father in the eternal realm. This is what Jesus Christ promises to those who believe in him. The drama of his being born, dying and rising, is the same drama of our own soul. It is the living myth – always and everywhere true – of every existing thing.