

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

5th May 2016

“And now glorify me, O Father, with thyself,
with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.”

– *St. John 17:5.*



These words from Our Lord’s prayer at the Last Supper, which I have just quoted to you, find their fulfilment today. Glory is the public recognition or display of greatness. Forty days after the Resurrection, we celebrate the great feast of the Ascension: our Lord’s triumphant return into heaven, when not only as God but even as man he shows forth his glory. After the singing of the Gospel, the Paschal Candle is extinguished, signifying the end of the 40-day sojourn of the Risen Lord: he has taken the time to give final instructions to his Apostles and to lay the foundations of his Church; now he leaves them to carry on his work and returns to the Father. “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again I leave the world, and I go to the Father” (St. John 16:28). In the Church’s calendar the Ascension is one of the five greatest feasts of the year, because it is the culmination of Christ’s whole earthly work.

In this church we have a touching memorial to the sons of the parish who never returned from the Great War. Other, luckier families had the joy of welcoming their son’s home after the unprecedented agonies of this conflict. A soldier’s homecoming is always a joyful occasion; in the ancient world conquering heroes would return with the spoils they had won in war. The Resurrection marked the Lord’s victory over Satan; the Ascension is his homecoming. And Our Lord does not simply return to heaven – in any case, in some sense he never really left it, because the perfect vision of God, which is the essence of heaven, was always present in Christ’s soul – he does not simply return to heaven, but he brings with him the spoils of victory. In other words, Christ does not cast off our humanity when he ascends to heaven, like some celestial serpent who would shake off his skin. No, the flesh which the Divine Word took up in Mary’s womb, the flesh that was nailed to a cross and rose from the dead, the flesh we shall see at the last day when we hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” or “depart from me ye cursed”: that flesh rises into heaven today. If we fully understood what this really meant, we would fall from our seats with astonishment. For all eternity, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the infinite and eternal God, will be clothed with our lowly nature. He is not ashamed of it; he loves it. This is what the Fathers of the Church mean when they say: “that which [Christ] has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved” (*e.g.*, St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Letter 101*). Perfect man, Christ took on himself our whole human nature – flesh and blood, soul and emotions – and today he carries them all triumphantly to

heaven, so that one day, if we cooperate with this redemption, we may follow him to heaven.

“The glory I had with thee before the world was.” This mysterious phrase came into my mind a few weeks ago when I met some Jehovah Witness missionaries just down the road, because it shows that Christ is God, existing before any creature. I sometimes wonder whether we Catholics ought not to be just a bit ashamed at how indifferent we are about spreading the true faith, when we see the zeal with which others spread their errors. It is so dangerous to base one’s faith on a few Bible verses taken out of context. In any case, please pray for these men and for all those who claim to be Christians but who reject the divinity of Our Lord, and try to remember what I am about to tell you. God may reward his friends the saints for their fidelity, but he himself “inhabiteth light inaccessible” (I Timothy 6:16), as Saint Paul puts it. God’s own personal glory – the shining forth of his eternal, uncreated goodness – can never be shared by any creature. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said, “I will not give my glory to another” (Isaiah 42:8). And yet, Christ claims precisely this glory.

Not only does the Son possess God’s glory: in a certain sense he *is* God’s glory. Saint Paul goes right to the point when he calls Christ “the brightness of [the Father’s] glory and the figure of his substance” (Hebrews 1:3). Blessed Columba Marmion picks up this theme and explains: “If God had created nothing, had left all things in the state of possibility, He would, however, have had His essential and infinite glory. By the very fact of being what He is, the Eternal Word is like a Divine canticle, a living canticle, singing the praise of the Father, expressing the plenitude of His perfections” (*Christ the Life of the Soul*, p. 307). Therefore, dear friends, if Jesus Christ claims for himself this glory that belongs to God alone, that is proof enough for us. True God and true man, Jesus Christ receives his glory today.

“Lifting up his hands, he blessed them, and it came to pass, whilst he blessed them, he departed from them, and was carried up to heaven” (St. Luke 24:50-51). Not only did Our Lord take our borrowed human nature up to heaven; he even took up his wounds, once painful, now glorious. As he rose to heaven and raised his hands in blessing, those holes could still be seen, and their memory would forever be fixed in the Apostles’ minds. “What are these wounds in the midst of thy hands?” asked the prophet Zacariah, and now comes the answer, “With these I was wounded in the house of them that loved me” (Zachariah 13:6). The “house of them that loved me” means first of all the people of Israel, the ungrateful nation that rejected its promised Messiah, but it means us as well, we who have been baptised, but have often been so ungrateful ourselves. We put those wounds there. And yet – wonder of wonders – those wounds have become trophies, and our King carries them to heaven. He blesses us with his wounded hands. If we accept this blessing and are faithful, then one day we too shall ascend.