

CATECHISM FOR ADULTS:

VII. 'He ascended into Heaven'

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

FORTY days after the Resurrection Christ was, in the words of St Luke 'taken up' or 'raised up' (Acts 1, 9-11). He ascended into heaven and was hidden from his disciples. St Mark adds that he now sits at the right hand of God (Mark 16, 14).

These scriptural references speak for themselves. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the same doctrine is taught. Christ, who in his human nature has suffered and made 'purgation of sins, sitteth on the right hand of the majesty on high' (Hebrews 1, 3). This is the entry of Christ, as the redeeming head of the redeemed people, into the presence of the Father. He is no longer subject to suffering and to the will of the world. He has put on incorruption, and having put it on, goes to the place of incorruption, the presence of the Father. In Christ, the incorruption and purity of the first state of man are restored, but at an infinitely higher level.

His ascension does not mean that he changes so far as his divinity is concerned, for the Son is equal to the Father; it is rather that the full effects of the union of the human nature to the person of the Word are released in that human nature. What was prefigured in the Transfiguration on the Mount is now realized as the body of Jesus, is totally possessed by the divine glory. As man he is so closely united to God, that once the will of the Father has been fulfilled he enters into the place of honour, for he has become much better than the angels (Hebrews 1, 3). Even the immaterial Spirits who serve God are subject to him.

'Being consummated' or made perfect, he becomes to all that obey him 'the cause of eternal salvation' (Hebrews 5, 9), for his full perfection is now achieved by his elevation in glory to share in the rule and dominion of the Father. True enough, as Word, he always exercised this power, but now as man—incarnate and identified with the history of the human race—he is enthroned to rule with divine power, sharing, as St John Damascene said, in the glory and honour of the divinity.

He exercises this power by right in virtue of the union of the

human and divine nature in the person of the Son, while it is at the same time his by merit, owing to his excelling perfection. St Paul presses the point even further; 'he has ascended far above all the heavens' (Ephesians 4, 10) for he is above the whole created cosmos as its Lord. He is above 'all principalities and powers, and virtue and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come. And he hath subjected all things under his feet and hath made him head over all the Church' (Ephesians 1, 20-23).

What is the relevance of this for the Christian? It means that Christ's victory not only releases man from sin and opens the way to God, but that Christ does lead and draw men to God. His ascension is, as St Leo said, our ascension. The ascended Christ is the direct cause of salvation and it is with power that he acts, exercising a lordship of mercy and love. This is so because he does not ascend in isolation, but does so as the head of all those who are joined to him by faith and charity. As head of the Church he enters into the presence of the Father, carrying with him the spoils of victory—those sons and daughters who through him have been adopted into the household of God. It is the ascended Christ who sends the Holy Spirit by whom Christians live and are drawn heavenwards. 'It is expedient to you that I go. For if I go not the Paraclete will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you.' (John 16, 7.)

The Christian, as a consequence, not only seeks 'the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God' (Colossians 3, 1) in the sense that everything a Christian does is directed towards the things of the spirit. This is obvious because the whole Christian life is founded on the endeavour to value the things of God, such as charity, more than anything else, since they are the treasure of which the Gospel speaks. It means also that a Christian's life is hid with Christ in God. Its source is God and its goal is God: the only approval sought is God, the standard accepted is Christ. If the Christian responds to the gifts God gives him he is drawn towards God by the power of the ascended Christ: first in this life, through the conflicts of the state of struggle and warfare; then, if he be faithful, after death his victory is to possess the treasure.

Christian hope is, then, a confidence in the present rule of the ascended Christ over all things and the Christian's recognition

that the intercession of Christ, our great high priest, is continuous and effective. It is this effectiveness, hidden but real, that faith emphasizes: 'you shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you'. (Acts 1, 8).

Does this mean that the Christian despises the created world? No, to despise the world would be to despise the creation of God, which is good. Christ too has blessed the world and material things by taking our flesh. Salvation is worked out in this world, in circumstances defined by matter and economic circumstances. These things are accepted and can become media of grace, for the whole man—body and soul—is the subject of the redeeming process, which is transmitted to us through hearing and sight and taste, through our environment. The good use of material things is never irrelevant, though it is not an end in itself. The Christian believes that God has made man to enjoy the earth and also that he is called beyond the earth. While he lives in the flesh it is his task to use material things for good, not setting his heart in them, but by seeking justice and mercy, rendering them signs and symbols through which he reaches out towards God. He lives in the world, and loves the world, but he does not live for the world, for he knows that the world is only of value in so far as it serves as the prelude for the new heaven and earth, the community of charity before the Father.

Perhaps the thing that strikes us most about the ascension is the withdrawal of the perceptible presence of Christ. The children of Israel had been led out of bondage during the day by a pillar of cloud, and at night by a pillar of fire (Exodus 13, 21); the Law was given by the veiled presence on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19, 16 seq.). Solomon's Temple was filled by a cloud, the sign of the presence of the glory of God (3 Kings 8, 10-11). This was the boast of Israel; the letters of the law on the stones brought condemnation, and a veil was upon all hearts (2 Cor. 3). With the coming of the Word made flesh the presence of God is as near to man as is possible, for it enters now into his very life—'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God' is 'given in the face of Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 4, 6). Because of this men live anew, in that they no longer live for the Law, but can live the Law because they live in and by the Lord of the Law. It is the presence of Christ in the flesh that effects this—but what of the presence now that Christ is ascended?

The Scriptures suggest two things. First, that now the way has been opened man has reached an adult state, for he has, in Christ, begun to put away the things of a child, and to live by faith and hope in Christ: 'blessed are they that have not seen and have believed' (John 20, 29). Secondly, though the perceptible presence is withdrawn, a real presence does remain: 'Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world' (Matt. 28, 20). Occasionally some great saint is given a depth of vision lacking in other men: St Stephen, dying, saw the ascended Christ in glory (Acts 7, 55, 1), and to St Paul there was given some experience beyond his powers of expression, for he had 'heard words which it is not granted to man to utter'. Normally however, men are led towards heaven through quite ordinary perceptible signs. It is within this sphere that the grace-directed ministry of the Word takes place, and also the grace-effective ministry of the Sacraments.

Christ, the Word, came to teach, and after the Resurrection, he committed this task to the Apostles—to those he sends as his representatives, which is what the word 'apostle' means. Because all power in heaven and in earth is given to him, Christ by the exercise of his royal power commands the eleven to go and teach all nations (Matt. 28, 18-19). By this delegation he sends those he has chosen to teach men 'to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you'.

Among the apostles one is chosen, Simon Bar-Jona, who is re-named Peter, Cephas, Rock. 'Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona; because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven. And I say unto thee, that thou art Peter: and upon this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Matt. 16, 17-18). All the apostles have power: the Church has power to bind upon earth and in heaven (Matt. 18, 17), James and John are with Peter 'pillars of the Church' (Galatians 2, 6-9). But it was to Peter that the triple command, corresponding to the triple denial, is given: 'Feed my sheep' (John 21, 15-17). It is Peter who is Peter Rock. Why is he rock? Surely because it is God who is Rock, and his Christ who is the corner stone, they are the rock-like refuge and foundation—and it is with them power to constitute such a rock as Peter. Abraham, too, the father of the people, was a rock (cf. Isaias. 51) because as the Rabbis surmised, in Abraham God saw a rock on which he could found the world. Peter, like Abraham, was a man of faith and on his

faith the Church is founded as on a rock. This is why Peter's personal weakness in action seemed so important to St Paul.

The bishop succeeded to the position of the apostle and round him the infant Church gathered, as he exercised his two supreme functions, of offering the sacrifice of the 'breaking of bread' and preaching the unchanging truth that is Christ. He is no mere administrative official, he was and is both high priest and witness. For St Ignatius of Antioch, 'he sits enthroned as the type of God' because he is the father of his people to whom he bears witness with authority. His task is not to be original or clever, but to speak the Word of God from his throne, that is the symbol of teaching. His task, as St Hippolytus said, 'is to shepherd the flock of God', to lead them in faith and charity towards the Father. 'Do you all follow your bishop as Jesus Christ followed the Father? Neither are you anything without the bishop and presbyters—be careful to observe one eucharist, for there is one flesh of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup of his Blood: there is one altar, as there is one bishop.' These are the words of St Ignatius of Antioch.

When the bishop teaches his flock in accordance with the tradition, Christ is present, for the bishop is the instrument he uses in his rulership of the Church. When the bishop takes the bread and the wine, in obedience to the divine command, and offers them to God, Christ is again present, and through his creative presence the Church lives as a holy people united in Christ. When he binds or looses it is no mere human device but the power of Christ that is involved. By right of his succession from the apostles—through the laying on of hands—the bishop rules his people, to them he is married by the ring he wears. His task is to seek the lost sheep, to lead his flock towards heaven, and to give his life for them if need be. It is in obedience to the bishop that the clergy serve the people of God, for their ministry, though no less real than his, is dependent on him.

Over the whole Church the Bishop of Rome, to use the ancient phrase, 'presides in charity' because of his superior origin. His witness is the witness of Peter, and when he acts as the successor of Peter he is the mouthpiece of the Church, 'since he enjoys that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed, in defining a doctrine concerning faith and morals'. This is the teaching of the Vatican Council which also defined that he has plenary jurisdiction throughout the

whole Church over all the faithful. He teaches without error in the sphere of faith and morals because it is his task to feed the flock of Christ with the pure word of God; he leads with supreme authority because the gates of hell cannot prevail.

Christ our Lord 'is the head of the body of the Church' (Col. 1, 18) in two senses. He is head in that all the grace that flows into the souls of men, through the sacraments and through the free mercy of God, comes from him. He is also head in that he rules the Church at all times, in all places, and for all eternity. The Bishop of Rome is but his delegate—the instrument he uses to guide the Church on earth, in that state which is subject to all the limitations of earthly existence. Hence the Pope is called the Vicar or representative of Christ in so far as direction of the Church on earth is concerned. All the vast complexity of ecclesiastical administration and law is for, and only is of value as intending, the salvation of souls and the teaching of truth. Every function the Church exercises is exercised in subordination to Christ.

CARAVAGGIO

An ill-lit stable and a sprawling groom,
 A gambler counting coins, an anxious peasant
 His brown feet grimy with the miles he'd come—
 This was the world Christ walked in, it was not pleasant.

A boy turned screaming from a murder. Whose?
 Some brothel-keeper in Trastevere.
 Slyly the customers slipped on their shoes,
 Made for the back door and got clean away.

Darkness crowded him. Still there was some light
 On David's shoulder naked against the night
 Falling, and falling on the arm which held

By a black knot of hair a severed head.
 Three years of flight, a fever and he was dead,
 And the long horror was at last dispelled.

BENET WEATHERHEAD