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The Sunday after Ascension

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Ascension, Whitsunday and Trinity

When we allow the wonder of these feast days to sink deeply into our hearts, we discover joy, and more joy. And I am inclined to think that if contemporary people, who do not believe in Christ, really considered what Christianity claims for these days; they would be compelled to inquire further into the Faith.

Ascension, Whitsunday, and Trinity complete what we began in Advent. He of whom the prophets spoke, and who was born in humility, returns to glory. And from this fountain of glory flows forth the Person of Love, the Holy Spirit of God, into the life of the Church. Now from the Church, filled with the Spirit's power, comes the adoration of the triune God.

Ascension is the feast of the glory of Christ Jesus. As Jesus ascends into glory, He takes "captivity captive," and gives gifts to men. The captivity, which is now His captive, is twofold.

First, Christ takes us who were captive to sin and death with Him into the presence of God. He takes our humanity, which is never to be put off, beyond the hierarchy of Angels and Saints, and sits supreme at the right hand of the Father.

Language about sitting at the right hand of the Father is, of course, metaphorical. God has no right hand. But Jesus lives in the sphere of God's presence nonetheless. His humanity, transformed by the resurrection into a dimension conformed to spirit, speaks of His perfect sacrifice, and therefore, by His very presence with the Father, the glorified Christ intercedes continually for us. We are kept by His redemptive eternal power.

And so by His grace we who have believed, and have been made the adopted children of God through Baptism, who have died with Him and risen with Him, live now by and in Him, in ascended glory. What He experiences now in person, we see at a distance, waiting for the dark glass we look through to fade into clear vision.

Second, Jesus took captive the devil and all his works, and now he has but a short time. "Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy foot-stool." was a favorite Psalm of the New Testament writers. (Psalm 110.1). With the Ascension of Jesus, the destiny of man is certain and evil is surely doomed.

And so, Jesus reigns over sin, death, and Satan. But Christ's vision is consummated in love. His love for the Father and the Father's for Him joins them in everlasting joy. As eternal Persons, their relation has always been so, but now with His humanity conformed to spirit, this experience extends to the fullness of what it means to be human.

And out of this Absolute Joy, the Spirit is sent from the Father and the Son to join the Church to Them in the selfsame Love. This is the meaning of Whitsunday.

The Spirit moves the mind of the Church to the recollection of Jesus, and guides the Church into all truth. And the power that the Spirit brings is the love of God poured forth into the hearts of men. It is this power of Love, and no other, that joins us to His truth. All the gifts given to the Church through the Spirit find their proper place in love.

This is why St. Thomas Aquinas named the Holy Spirit The Gift. He distributes every good gift in the Body of Christ. The Spirit is the Principle of Love that joins us to God and to one another. "If we love one another," says St. John, "God dwelleth in us and His love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in Him, and He in us, because He hath given us of His Spirit." (I John 4: 12,13.)

And when we know ourselves to be joined to God in His power of Love, then we are moved to honor, to praise, and to adore. The Father sent the Son to save us. The Son died to do the Father's will. The Spirit fills us with every good gift that the Father and the Son bestow. Adoration of the Trinity is our only true and proper response. This is the meaning of Trinity Sunday.

With Trinity Sunday we profess that, finally, there is no other place for us than the presence of God. The adoration of the Trinity is the end, the destiny, of what it means to be a human person. In the words of St. Augustine, "It is thou, O God, who dost rouse mankind to delight in praising thee, for thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in thee." (Confessions 1.1). Dante describes the same thing in poetic image. "For everything the will has ever sought is gathered there, and there is every quest made perfect, which apart from it falls short." (Paradiso xxxiii.103) This rest of Augustine and the quest of Dante are what Jesus has found in His ascended glory, and also what He has won for us.

And therefore, to honor, to praise, and to adore the Blessed Trinity is the highest life and experience that a human being can have.

These three feasts, Ascension, Whitsunday, and Trinity, gather up the course of the Church Year, the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And we see throughout the whole drama that God in his mercy has made it so. In the sanctification of time, which is the Church Year, we recollect and live into the reality that God has prepared for us. Our journey is conformed to His.

Surely there is no greater gospel to be shared with the contemporary world than what we possess now through faith. To a world, which assumes that human personality is the measure of all things, Christianity offers a more perfect reality. We know by faith that the wholeness of what it means to be a human being is really found nowhere else than in the Ascended Christ, in Whom we discover the

everlasting joy of the Triune Personality of God.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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