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The Sunday after Ascension Day

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The Ascension

"Consider the phenomenon of soap operas, would you say that the soul was made for that?" It was during a graduate seminar on the De Anima of Aristotle that James Doull asked this question. I have never forgotten it.

It was the first graduate seminar that I attended at Dalhousie. And this one, on Aristotle's doctrine of the Soul, difficult enough by itself, was made all the more intimidating by the fact that four professors sat in for the teaching of Professor Doull and for the discussion.

While there were hard questions asked of the graduate students, this one was rhetorical, but nonetheless effective. "What is the soul for?"

Aristotle answers this on several levels, each of which pertains in part to the life of man. In many respects his doctrine remains definitive. Of course he did not have the great privilege of knowing the Incarnate Lord, and thus we can hardly hold him accountable for the knowledge that has come to us exclusively through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

If we turn to the Christian Religion and ask the same question, "What is the soul for?" we find the meaning of the Ascension of our Lord. But let us take one step at a time.

From one point of view the Christian understanding does not differ from that of Aristotle. For him, the soul is made for the universe. Its various faculties and capacities operate in relation to its environment. That is the soul's substance, its logical nature and form.

In the Christian religion the same thing is understood. Man is created to exist in the universe. The sun and the moon and the stars are for times and seasons. Adam is put in the Garden to tend it and keep it. He names the animals. Mankind, as male and female, is given dominion over the rest of creation in its every variety of goodness.

Aristotle has, as well, some understanding of man as being the image of God. The intellectual life of the soul is self-reflective, and thereby pleasurable, and in this way man is like God's own self-knowing and happiness. And while, says Aristotle, the life of God himself is too high for man, still man's greatest happiness consists in the contemplation of God.

In the Christian Religion, man is said to be created in the image of God. As such man is created for God and belongs to God. The relation of man to the universe in which he lives is always under this larger umbrella of God's design and purpose for human life.

But now comes the great difference between Aristotle and Christianity, a difference that must be seen as something that came into the view of mankind only by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught that the soul of man finds its blessedness in union with God. It is not enough simply to know about God and to contemplate his life, as truly wonderful as

that is. The call of man in Jesus Christ is to be one with God, to participate in his life, to live in and by and with him in the deepest reality of communion. "If a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23).

The glorious culmination of this participation and union is seen in the ascension of Jesus into heaven. What he had said to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning was now accomplished. "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

What is the soul for? The soul is for happiness and blessedness in the undiminished presence of God. There is no other end for man that leaves him blessed and happy. The sole intention of Jesus was to return to his Father - and to take us with him. His faith in and obedience to the Father, the speaking of the Father's words, the doing of the Father's will, had no other purpose than to bring humanity into friendship with God.

And so friendship with God, in the most intimate and personal sense, is the destiny of man, what man's every capacity and every faculty are ultimately made for. All that we do here and now bears on all that shall be ours in the eternal habitations. "For everything the will has ever sought is gathered there, and there is every quest made perfect, which apart from it falls short" says Dante.

In the most glorious and mysterious way, the ascension of Jesus means that man has a place that is eternal within the mind and will of God. And that glory and mystery extends through man into the creation all about him. Jesus told us that the meek shall inherit the earth. And Paul tells us that the whole creation groans and travails waiting for the glorious liberty of the children of God. It is a great mystery, but one that our religion does not shy from, that by virtue of our ascension in Christ, in ways that only God knows, creation itself finds the way out of corruption into eternity. As Jesus takes us with him, so shall we take it with us - on that last great day when time is rolled up like a garment.

What is the soul for? Soap operas? The deep dark vanity of human sin and despair? Deception and betrayal? Loneliness and self-pity? No. The soul is for God and then for us and one another. It is the destiny of man to look into that "still point of the turning world." The soul is for truth, and beauty, and goodness, and the harmony of soul and body taken up into thoughts and pleasures of whatsoever is just and pure and lovely and of good report.

The Ascension is about all of these things perfectly realized in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. His suffering and his shame had one purpose only, and that was the exaltation of man to the right hand of God, a life not finally as Aristotle experienced it, too high for man, but the proper place for man, at the intersection of time and eternity, where man is forever united to God by his wisdom and power.

Well if this be so, and our religion teaches that it is, the beginning of each day should welcome the question, "What is the soul for?" And the answer is like an unforgettably sweet refrain. The soul is for God. Augustine puts it best, "O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." But St. John has the last word, "And He that sat upon the throne said, "Behold I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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