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The Sunday after Ascension Day

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REST AND MOTION

Early this coming August I will be travelling with the Parish Choir to one of the most ancient centres of Christian faith and worship in the British isles, the cathedral of St. Mary and St. Chad in Lichfield, Staffordshire, England. The cathedral is itself 13th century – badly battered by Cromwell's guns during the English civil war of the 17th century, and beautifully restored since – but the tradition of worship that is carried on there goes back to the 7th century, to a saintly English bishop named Chad (d. 672 A. D.), who established the episcopal see in Lichfield. Ever since then, as in other cathedrals of England, the daily service of God in praise and prayer has been continually rendered there. In taking up residence in Lichfield cathedral, and singing evensong daily over the course of a week, our parish choir takes up a living tradition of worship that stretches back in time to the seventh century - and beyond that to the church of the apostles.

Except for a brief time, during the "hanging chad" controversy of the last presidential election but one, Saint Chad has received less attention from the modern church than he deserves. What we know of Chad, his life and faith, comes from the 8th century chronicle of the Venerable Bede, the History of the English Church and People. Bede's record permits us to glimpse a man who combined extraordinary qualities. A monk and a missionary, he was both a man of fervent prayer, and a tireless preacher of the gospel. Bede illustrates both aspects with telling detail. On the one hand, Chad preferred to make his preaching tours through the countryside by foot, until the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered him to make the longer ones on horseback. On the other hand, he also had a house of retreat next to the church at Lichfield, where he went into retreat with some companions for study and prayer, whenever his work and preaching permitted. Moreover, as a very capable leader of men, who was called to high office as a bishop, he astonished his contemporaries by his willingness to surrender his office at the bidding of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He accepted promotion and demotion, the call to active service and to prayerful contemplation, in the same spirit. Bede shows us in his sketch of Chad an image of the unified and integrated spiritual life that is possible in Christ, a life of action and contemplation, of worship and witness, of rest and motion.

The principle of such a life as his, in which rest and motion, action and contemplation, worship and witness, high office and low, compose one integrated whole, is explicit at this time of the Church's year, in the

great gospel feasts that commemorate the Lord's ascension into heaven, and the descent of his Spirit upon the Church for the first publishing of the gospel. One may speak of these two events in terms of rest and motion. In his suffering death in the human nature he took upon himself from Mary, Christ had overcome the obstacles against man's return to God. In his ascension in that same human nature, crucified and risen, Christ completed man's return to God. In his ascension, human nature goes up, and comes to rest in God, in union with that eternal good which alone can satisfy man's longing for happiness. ("Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" – the seventh and final word of the cross anticipates this Sabbath rest of the Son of God.) Our redemption therefore is complete: nothing more needs be done but for Christ to claim the fruits of his victory. "After he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, [he] sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting [that is, 'looking forward with complete assurance'] till his enemies be made his footstool" (Hebrews 10: 12, 13). The submission of his enemies comes about in their conversion to faith in him..

Therefore, as a result of Christ's going up (forty days after the Resurrection), the Spirit came down upon the Church (fifty days after the Resurrection, on the feast of Pentecost). The coming of the Spirit upon the Church stirs it into motion – the publishing of the gospel in all the world. And by the Spirit-fired apostolic witness to Christ the world itself is stirred into motion – the inward motion of conversion, of turning away from false gods to serve the true and living God in faith. But this motion in the Church – of converting and being converted – leads back to rest: for the Church which goes forth in witness returns to rest in the Lord in worship. As we read in the New Testament, after the Lord's ascension, the disciples "were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:53 cf. Acts 1:14). Even after the first publishing of the gospel on the feast of Pentecost, they "continued daily with one accord in the temple...praising God" (Acts 2:46-47).

As the humanity of the crucified and risen Christ is exalted in heaven - seated upon the throne of God, to rule the world with the authority of divine love - so by the gift of his Spirit to the Church, he is exalted on earth – through the publishing of the gospel of his kingdom and the obedience of faith. Christ is, as the psalmist foretold, "enthroned upon the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:3, rendered loosely in the Prayer Book version as "thou worship of Israel"). This going up and coming down, this going forth and return, are complementary aspects of one integrated reality – manhood taken up into God, mankind returned to God and at rest in him, fulfilled and transformed by heavenly grace and benediction, partaking in the glory of the divine life. Manhood taken up into Godhead in Christ – that is the principle of the spiritual life which is given to us in the Church, the principle of our witness and worship, of action and contemplation, of rest and motion. That is the beginning and end of all our strivings, the origin and the goal of all our motion.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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