

Home Retreat May 2023 – The Ascension

The day before yesterday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. It is as though Eastertide has finished and we have nothing to look forward to except Pentecost. Well, yes, in a way. The two feasts are of course intimately connected. The surprising thing is that the Ascension is mentioned only by Luke, once at the end of his gospel, ‘As he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven’. (Lk 4.31) A bit more explicitly the beginning of Acts, ‘he was lifted up while they looked on and a cloud took him up out of their sight’ (1.9). The cloud is, of course, a symbol of the presence of God, so that it means that the Risen Christ joined his Father in heaven. Most important is the angelic message, an inspired interpretation of the events, given by an *angelus interpretes*, as often in scripture. The angel explicitly links it to the coming of the Spirit: they are to go back into Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Spirit.

The scene is what is called by Joe Fitzmyer ‘imitative historiography’, recounting an event in terms of another event which shows its meaning by comparison. It is built on the Ascension of Elijah in the Old Testament, where Elijah was carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot, leaving his cloak behind in the hands of Elisha as a sign that Elisha is to continue his mission and ministry in the power of Elijah. In just the same way the disciples are to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus, which is why they go back into the city, where they go into the upper room and wait, ‘constantly persevering in prayer’ (Acts 1.14). The Ascension is no more than the preliminary to the coming of the Spirit. This explains why it occurs only in the Lukan writings, for Luke is concerned to map out the beginnings of the Christian Church, which he will continue to delineate through the Acts of the Apostles. Just as Elijah’s cloak, left behind, is a sign of his power transferred to Elisha, so the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost will be the coming of the power of the Risen Christ on his disciples. The significance of the first scene of the disciples after the departure of Jesus, the choice by lot of a successor to Judas (incidentally, this is next Sunday’s first reading) is that till the Spirit comes the disciples are incapable of making any significant move. The choice cannot be made by human means of election since the disciples have no divine power among them to inspire their choice, so that the choice has to be made by the drawing of lots. So the period between Ascension and Pentecost is a betwixt-and-between period, a sort of Black Hole, deliberately left empty, like Holy Saturday, which has no liturgy till Easter Sunday begins after sunset (the moment when any Jewish day begins).

For us Christians, and particularly at this season of the liturgical year, the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, the Advocate or substitute for Jesus Christ, who stands at our side – in the worst of the cursing psalms the worst thing possible is to have the wrong ally at your right hand, as in the prayer ‘let an accuser stand at his right’ (Ps 108.6 – just where the defender and advocate should be). It is the Spirit who fills the apostles, who guides every step of their way in the Book of the Acts, the Spirit which binds the fractious and heterogeneous community of Corinth together and enables them to transcend themselves and their quarrels. For all that, it is valuable to consider how the Spirit, the holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is presented in the Old Testament, before there was any developed idea of the Trinity.

To begin with, we often neglect that in the creation-myth the Spirit of God is the first real entity in the narrative. The earth was a formless void *tohu we bohu*, this-and-that, no THING at all, when the spirit of God was hovering or sweeping over this noTHINGness. I said 'creation-myth' deliberately, meaning a story (*muthos* in Greek) truer than factual truth. A myth is the expression of a deep (normally religious) truth which makes sense of life and gives life its shape more fully than any straight factual statement. If the Spirit of God was hovering or sweeping over the formless void, it was giving this void its being and potential – not only the whole story of human evolution in one powerful image but the whole system of the genesis of the boundless universe onwards from the so-called 'Big Bang' (a term invented as a joke by the doubtfully atheist astronomer Fred Hoyle). There at the beginning is the *ruah-Adonai*, the wind, the breath or the spirit of the Lord. The same word is used in all the relevant languages: *ruah* in Hebrew, *πνευμα* in Greek, *spiritus* in Latin.

This *ruah* is no gentle breeze. In the early history of the People of God, the entry into and establishment in Canaan, a fairly rough and brutal period where physical force predominated, the spirit of God rushes upon the defenders of God's people and empowers an unexpected nobody to take control. The spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel, who had a few quick victories, which brought peace for 40 years (Jg 3.11). Or Jephthah to pacify the Ammonites (11.29) or most of all, Samson to inspire him against the Philistines (13.25) and tear up a lion with his bare hands (14.6, 19,) or burst the bonds of the Philistines and kill 1,000 men with the jawbone of an ass (15.19). So the spirit of the Lord can occasion extreme violence. It can also occasion some sort of ecstatic behaviour in the prophets and eventually King Saul (quite out of character and shocking, 1 Sm 10.5, 10-11).

I would like to add to the creative presence of the *ruah-Adonai* presiding over the genesis of all things in Genesis 1.2 three other moments in the Old Testament to give the flavour of the mysterious divine influence which will burgeon in the full revelation of the New Testament as the Holy Spirit. The first is that wonderful spirit of guidance and equity which will be the spirit of the Davidic ruler expected for the end of time in Isaiah 11:

A branch will spring from the stock of Jesse,
a shoot will grow from his roots.
On him will rest the spirit of the LORD,
the spirit of wisdom and insight,
the spirit of counsel and power,
the spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD:

This is the spirit of equity and right judgment, the quality of the ideal ruler of the Kingdom of God, the spirit of guidance, which every ruler who presides genially and peacefully over his people should have, as well as the sevenfold gift of the Spirit at confirmation.

The second moment to be added is the wonderful passage in praise of Wisdom in the Book of Wisdom, a highpoint of the praises of wisdom in the early chapters of the

book, which is itself the summit of the wisdom tradition. These are the 21 qualities of Wisdom (significantly 3 x 7, both special numbers):

For within her is a spirit intelligent, holy, unique,
manifold, subtle, mobile,
incisive, unsullied, lucid,
invulnerable, benevolent, shrewd,
irresistible, beneficent, generous,
steadfast, dependable, unperturbed,
almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all spirits,
intelligent, pure and most subtle.
For Wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things.
She is a breath of the power of God,
pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty.

It is tempting to say that this is more cerebral, closer to the modern concept of wisdom, almost scholarly wisdom, but it is wider and more embracing than that, a way of getting at Truth and avoiding related pitfalls, an all-round description of the 'breath of the power of God'. It is significant that the passage starts with a description of Wisdom, going on only afterwards to the relationship of Wisdom to the concept of God.

The third moment of the Old Testament view of the spirit is the spirit as the source of life in the wonderful vision of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37.1-14. The prophet is carried away by the spirit of the Lord and set down in the middle of a valley full of bones.

While I was prophesying, there was a noise, a clattering sound; it was the bones coming together, one bone to another. And as I looked, they were covered with sinews; flesh was growing on them and skin was covering them yet there was no breath in them. He said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man. Say to the breath, "The Lord GOD says this: Come from the four winds, breath; breathe on these dead so that they come to life!"' I prophesied as he had ordered me and the breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet, a great, immense army. Then he said, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They keep saying, "Our bones are dry, our hope has gone; we are completely finished." So, prophesy. Say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: I am now going to open your graves; I shall raise you from your graves, my people, and lead you back to the soil of Israel. And you will know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people, and put my spirit in you, and you shall live.

It is tempting to say that the Gospel of John is referring directly to these three passages when Jesus is represented as saying 'I am the Way, I am Truth and Life'. The first of the three outlines the way to live, to direct life as God wills it; the second outlines the way to Wisdom as the breath of God, and the third is a vision of new life given to Israel by the breath of God. These are the gifts that Jesus gives to the Church in his presence by the Advocate whom he will send after his own departure at the Ascension, whom the disciples await in the upper room. I hope these thoughts will help to open us to the reception of these gifts at Pentecost in our search for the Way, for Truth and for Life in the Spirit of God.