

Homily for Ascension 2018

I was telling the school children at their Mother's Day liturgy about a photo I received recently on my phone from friends. Their daughter had just given birth to her first child. After several miscarriages it was good news for the family. What struck me in the photo was the astonishing look of both wonder and joy on the young woman's face as she held her new born. It was a real transformation from the girl she was before. The birth of a child changes a woman for ever. It changes every relationship within a family. As commonplace as the birth of a child is, every new child is totally new and unique. It is at once an expected event and a deep mystery. But only if one has eyes to see it.

On this Mother's Day we are celebrating the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. In spite of the name there is no up and down in God. No place and time. The Feast celebrates the completion of the mission given by the Father to Jesus. And Jesus has returned as he said he would to the Father. His exodus is now complete. Ascension then has Jesus leaving the human domain and returning to the divine domain.

But as he had told his disciples he was not a ghost. He had not become just some kind of spirit. He had ate and drank with them after the Resurrection. He had asked Thomas to touch his wounds. He was physically real, although glorified. The one who became flesh and dwelt amongst us has taken his glorified flesh born of Mary to the Father. That is some transformation! The implications are great. This created physical universe has been the home of the Son of God on earth. A piece of creation is now with God. And because Jesus Christ is with the Father then this created universe also has a place and a future in God's love.

The world, then, is not just a stage on which we perform for a few years or so and then is discarded when all have died. The whole creation awaits its transformation in Christ. And while we and creation await, the disciples of the Lord, the Church, have a mission to be the eyes that see and the ears that hear and the flesh that touches to know as the poet says that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (From God's Grandeur, Gerald Manley Hopkins, see below). Every bush is burning with the glory of God.

No created thing need be an obstacle to God. Even snakes and poisons as we hear about in the Gospel of Mark today, cannot prevent the Word of God carrying out its purpose. The snake in Mark perhaps recalls the snake that got hold of St Paul when he was shipwrecked on the island of Malta. "Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm" (Acts 28:3-6).

This transformation of the disciples for their mission is captured in St Paul to the Ephesians. "The one who rose higher than all the heavens to fill all things is none other than the one who descended. And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself."

So the Lord's departure leaves the Church to continue his mission for which he promises to send the Holy Spirit to be its helper and guide. Because Christ has descended as it were and ascended again then every new born child and every star in the sky for the eyes of faith summon us to be changed and give ourselves like Christ in the service of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. And like Christ, the first fruits of the resurrection, we hope to share in his glory whole and complete.

Fr Graham Gatehouse

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89). Poems. 1918.

God's Grandeur

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.