

## Sunday in the Octave of the Ascension

The feast of the Ascension was celebrated last Thursday and the Mystery continues, represented by the now extinguished Paschal Candle.

It was expedient that Christ should disappear from this earth, otherwise his mission would have seemed to be no more than political or at best an act of human justice. The Ascension reminds us of the presence of God, caring for us and protecting us. It is through the Ascension that we become part of the nature of God with Christ. Each of us means something to God, and our humble works will have eternal value. It is through his Ascension that Christ can bring us to experience his presence through the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the liturgical Mystery and Sacraments. Jesus, true God and true man, returns to Heaven, and tells us who we are, where we belong.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: *The Ascension of Christ means that he no longer belongs to the world of corruption and death, which conditions our life. It means that he belongs completely to God. He, the eternal Son, has taken our human being to the presence of God.*

The mission of the Church, in fidelity to Christ is no longer worldly or political, but is a pilgrimage to paradise. In the words of Leo the Great: *What was visible in our Saviour has passed over into his mysteries.*

A theological notion we find more in Orthodoxy than in western Christianity is deification, *θεωσις*, the fulfilment of our creation. We are placed in the life of the Trinity in happiness and love. Christ reigns from heaven, not as a political figure, but as the sign of the recapitulation of all creation in God.

In the Middle Ages, the Sunday within the Octave of the Ascension was called *The Sunday of Roses*, because it was the custom to strew the floor of churches with roses.

The Ascension falls in spring, the season of flowers and the heavenly odours of new life in the countryside. The liturgy imitates nature, as nature speaks of the Creator. It is not without reason that nature was so important for the Romantics. God brought grace and nature into harmony. In this loveliness of spring, we remember how Christ said to his Apostles: *If ye loved me, ye would be glad, because I go to my Father!* We offer to Jesus the Roses by which he has embellished our earth. Their beauty and fragrance should make us think of him who made them. The town where Jesus grew up, Nazareth, bears the name which means a flower. The *Blue Flower* in the mind of Novalis and C.S. Lewis came to symbolise the longing we have for eternal life and everlasting beauty.

It is in this disposition that we await the descent of the Holy Ghost. This coming of a new dimension of God unites us all and brings an end to our conflicts. We are exhorted to be prudent and watch in prayer.

Jesus himself taught us what would happen. The Paraclete would give testimony of him, that is, would instruct them upon his Divinity, and teach them to be faithful to him, even so as to lay down their lives for him. The Apostles faced trials and martyrdom. Only St John died of natural causes. We are weak men, but the Holy Ghost gives strength and faith. *Thy grace is sufficient*, as St Paul affirmed in his adversity and suffering.

As those who came from the Jewish tradition were warned that they would be cast out of the synagogues, Christ tells us that we would be at odds with the Establishment and other signs of worldly wisdom. We can be assured that our persecutors are not Christians, nor do they know God. We are warned and should not be taken by surprise.

We will spend the eight days of the Octave in this interim between the disappearance of Christ and the promised Pentecost, in a week from now. We are called to live through this time in humility and patience. After the Octave day, there will be a few

days that seem to be neither here or there. Then will come the Vigil of Pentecost that reflects the Paschal Vigil. The proper *Hanc igitur* returns as during the Easter Octave. Eastertide will end on the Saturday preceding Trinity Sunday. It all seems to go so quickly in spite of the worldly events around us and the anxiety caused by human mendacity and ignorance. These are days to build up our hope and courage through humility.

We live these events through the celebration of the liturgy, which this year has been made inaccessible to most lay Christians. We priests have tried our best to ensure our presence to all through the internet and streamed or recorded videos. The problem has been the impossibility of dispensing the Sacraments whilst observing quarantine rules. It is my hope that God has not refused his grace to those who have desired for spiritual and godly reasons, and that the recess of the virus will make it possible once again to hold public church services and give the Sacraments to the faithful.

May the resplendence of Pentecost bring this grace and light to us all, and thus a new world, a new hope – without masks and sanitiser gel!

*Our soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we are delivered.*