

"A cloud received him away from their eyes" Acts 1.9  
Sermon for the Feast of the Ascension, May 14, 2015, at High Mass,  
St Peter's Cathedral, Charlottetown  
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I am celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of teaching my first university course and asking myself what I have done with my life. Despite all the diverse courses and programmes and places, it all comes to one thing: **I teach people to read and, as a result, I keep learning to read.** I teach only great texts and most of them many times: Aristotle *On the Soul*, St Augustine's *Confessions*, St Dionysius *On the Divine Names*, St Thomas' *Summa theologiae* to name a few, some almost every year. These texts are inexhaustibly deep, and each time I read and teach them I learn new things. Fr Peter Harris and I were brought up on a method of teaching and learning by Professors James Doull and Robert Crouse in the Classics Department at Dalhousie and I have tried to hand it on to my students like Fr Garrett, and most recently Deacon Mosher.<sup>1</sup> The main idea is this: if you read these texts very carefully, if you really get out of yourself into them, the truth in them will emerge, convince, and transform you. If, in contrast, you bring your prejudices and opinions to the texts, you will find them to be wrong. To understand their truth, we must get out of ourselves into them. Take, for example, the texts set by the Church for today.

If I were to ask you what they said, you might tell me: "Today is the Ascension and the Gospel and Lesson say that Jesus ascended into heaven." You may have a picture in your imagination, unfortunately in it Jesus probably looks like an early version of Superman leaping up into the sky. This has been a great embarrassment: first, because Jesus is not Superman, he is really and truly a man, and he is really and truly God, not something in between. Second, Western painters don't know what to do with the feet, which is what you would mostly see if he jumped up like Superman. In consequence of these and other embarrassments, when I preached at Oxford University on the Ascension I was told, even by Anglo-Catholics, that it was a doctrine they had given up. So, let us read these texts.

The first thing we discover is that "he ascended into heaven" occurs in only one place, the Latin version of the Creed which has just been sung by the Choir: "ascendit in caelum", and its translations.<sup>2</sup> This is not the same as what the Creed says in Greek "ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς", "he was taken up into the heavens". The Greek creed is closer to the Scripture: "ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν", "he was received up into heaven", according to St Mark, or "νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν", "A cloud received him away from their eyes", according to the Acts. When the Orthodox Churches depict the Ascension, there is no Superman jumping up, rather Christ is shown in the Glory

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<sup>1</sup> Fr Peter Harris celebrated the Mass at which this was preached, the Rev'd James Mosher was the Deacon of the Mass, and Fr David Garrett is the Rector designate of St Peter's Cathedral who invited them and me.

<sup>2</sup> The Latin Proper Preface for Ascension as sung by Fr Harris tonight is closer to the Greek: "elevatus".

of God, often seated on a rainbow. Here is one from the Latin rite Abbey of Monreale in deeply Greek Sicily, no doubt created by Byzantine workmen.



What is the difference between the imagination we bring and what the text says? First, the Scripture does not speak of what Jesus did, instead it declares what was done to him. He did not jump up, he was “taken up”, “lifted up” or even “received back,” back home to the Father from whom he came.

Second, What did it? A cloud. A cloud lifted him away, took him up, received him. In other words, the Glory of God did this, that is what the cloud signifies. Remember that the children of Israel were led by pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 14.21) and when God descended on Sinai there was “a thick cloud upon the mount” (Exodus 19.16). Today, that cloud reappears and receives Our Lord home. God reaches down and receives his Son as we pray he shall also receive us.

The inspired iconic depiction of the Ascension in the All Soul's Chapel of this Cathedral is true to the Scripture and the Greek text of the creed. Here the ascending Lord is enthroned above and upon the cloud and rises into the Glory.



Third, a close reading of the text explains something left unclear by our Prayer Book translation. It says "a cloud received him out of their sight." The Greek is more exact: "A cloud received him away from their eyes." The translation "sight" for "eyes" leaves the false impression that what they needed was a telescope. **No!** No enhancement of what we can see with bodily eyes would help. We shall continue to see Jesus, but with different eyes, the eyes of faith, the eyes of the mind. We now see Jesus by inner vision.

As Fr Crouse preached from this pulpit in 1985 quoting Archbishop Cranmer: "We should understand the sacrament, ...spiritually ...being like eagles in this life, we should fly up into heaven in our hearts, where that Lamb is at the right hand of his Father. ...Being made guests of Christ, having him dwell in us through the grace of his nature...we are assured...that we are fed spiritually unto eternal life by Christ's flesh crucified and by his blood shed."<sup>3</sup>

I intend to see Jesus here this evening. I always do when I receive Holy Communion at St Peter's. Because St Peter's is a place of faith, inner vision, and prayer, Jesus is seen here. But I shall not see him with my physical eyes. Translating St Thomas' hymn which we sing at Benediction "Praestet fides supplementum, sensuum defectui" by "faith our outward sense befriending" misleads. Faith helps our bodily senses only by telling them that Jesus has been received and reigns beyond their powers of perception. Faith supplies a supplement, a replacement, because the outward senses are defective. They are defective for seeing the Our Lord in the dazzling Glory of God, so defective that no enhancement of beauty or strength will enable them to see Him now. Gaze at the bread all you wish, bring a telescope or a microscope, bake it into a beautiful crusty bun, you will not see Jesus by those means.

Faith tells us "A cloud received him away from their eyes", the Glory of God has taken him away from being seen by bodily eyes, Jesus is hidden in God, there, with him, our life is also hidden. Faith gives us new senses, spiritual senses, senses of the soul, senses of the mind, the greatest philosophers and theologians, pagan and Christian, tell us that we have these. We must develop them. By them tonight we shall see Jesus, we shall smell the perfume of his presence, we shall hear his voice saying "Take eat, this is my Body broken for you". By them, we touch his spiritual flesh and enter the Glory, with David and the mystics we taste him.<sup>4</sup> We become one with the immortal Son of God, feeding on him, we become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. We are taken up into his divine and eternal life, just as his humanity was taken up today. We are shaken to the core, and we come away transformed. Let it be. Amen. Let it be.

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<sup>3</sup> Fr Crouse's sermon at the 1985 Atlantic Theological conference on "The Prayer Book": "The Eucharistic Doctrine in the Prayer Book", pp. 109-110, quoting *Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer relative to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 34.8.