

Being Genuinely Powerful

Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2020

There are many “*descents*” & “*ascents*” (“*downs*” & “*ups*”) in the life of Christ. We reflect on them throughout the year to inspire & make sense of our own lives (*especially when they're like a roller coaster*). We reflect on:

- His humbling *descent* into human life (at the *Incarnation*.)
- His exalting *ascent* into God's pleasure with how he was living his life (at the *Epiphany*.)
- His humbling *descent* into temptation, suffering & death (on the *Cross*.)
- His exalting *ascent* into an unusual, *spiritual* kind of bodily life (at the *Resurrection*.)

These are the basic *descents* & *ascents* that we focus on from Christmas through Easter. Each one is a treasure chest of powerful truths for living well. But there is one more “*ascent*” in the Easter Season that often doesn't get the attention it deserves. It's Christ's *ascent* to his place at the right hand of God, the *ascent* we celebrate this morning, *Ascension Sunday*.

For the apostles, the *Ascension* wasn't just a necessary part of the story to get Jesus back “up” into Heaven where he started. For them, the *Ascension* was a key part of the process of their becoming like Christ themselves. They don't realize this, though, until *Pentecost*, when Christ's Spirit descends and they start to experience their own *personal Ascension*. Then they realize that they are somehow invisibly, but *truly*, there – with Christ, in the heavenly realm, at the right hand of God.

The Spirit “*elevates*” their hearts & minds to understand that *they have ascended with him*. They are still at his side, and will be eternally. And this is both exalting & humbling for them. For they now realize that they have the same power to *be* good & to *do* good as Jesus had – that they are indeed Christ's Body on Earth. But they also realize that (*unless they yield to the redeeming grace of Christ's Spirit within them*) they are powerless (to *be* or *do* good.) So it's very *exciting* & very *sobering* at the same time. And it begins altering their whole understanding of the message & mystery of the Gospel. Gradually, day by day, they come to learn the two-fold mystery of *how to live* with Christ in the heavenly realm, and *how to live* their lives on earth “*as it is in Heaven*,” so that Christ continually “*comes again*” in the living of their everyday lives. And *then* what happens? Those around them see the mystery of their faith “in action.” Not that they were perfect. (It's true they weren't quite as “*motley*” a crew as before, but they were all still ‘*works in progress*’ like we are.) And, yet, this mystery of somehow being “*with*” Christ and “*in*” Christ, is what gave them the power to change the world – through what we now call “Christianity.”

In our day, it is hard to not be a bit “melancholy” about all of this – since we've seen a great deal of church history unfold, some of which has been horrifically evil – and also since our own Christian lives often seem to *pale* by comparison to the excited & humble lives of the early disciples. The Church doesn't often seem to be very “*ascended*” or “*elevated*” in our experience. There's nothing wrong with a bit of honest melancholy about that – as long as it awakens us to something real that we're missing, and doesn't degenerate into nostalgia or despair.

Much of our challenge, I think, has to do with how we understand & experience power in our lives. When we hear the word “*power*,” our associations are often sayings like “*power corrupts*”

or judgments like “*power hungry*” and “*abuse of power.*” Just the **word** “*power*” easily evokes images of coercion & violence. And so, few of us would admit, even to ourselves, that we have a desire to be powerful. On the contrary, we become conditioned to have a kind of “*power phobia*” and to resist “*taking charge,*” sometimes even of our own lives.

But our spiritual “*ascension*” – our taking our place with Christ at the right hand of God – is very clearly about power. It's just a very different **kind** of power than the power of corruption, coercion & violence.

It's “*clean*” power. “*Fresh*” power. Power that hasn't yet been “*sullied*” by greed, hatred, and delusions of grandeur. It's the power of that unusual, active kind of love, which is Just; Compassionate; and always delights in the Good. It's the love we encounter in Christ – that is within us, but not of our own making. It's the love that is not simply a feeling, but the power of an enlightened will – the power to know and to do what is truly best. This is the love that actively fulfills the commandments (because it *knows how to & desires to*). And so, in the revelation of God in Christ that we call “Christianity” – power & love become synonyms. Love is power. And power is love. Any “*power*” that is **not** love, is not actual power, but pretense. A counterfeit. Not the real thing.

What this means practically for us is that our ***desire to be powerful*** is not necessarily a false, “pretentious” desire, which we need to resist. It might well be ***the desire to ascend*** to that place of power within the Just & Compassionate Love of Christ that resides within us all. Let's not kid ourselves – to know & to do what is genuinely good takes extraordinary power. To be “*Christian*” is to be “*powerful*” in that sense. And it's a very paradoxical sense, because – *like Christ* – we become ***both*** powerful & vulnerable, ***both*** exalted & humble, at the same time.

And yet, we're wise to not run off “*hog wild*” with our desire to be powerful, as if it were always & only *clean & Christlike*. This is why we practice surrender. Surrender to being graciously “*scanned*” by the One “*to whom all desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hid,*” so that “*the thoughts of our hearts*” can be *cleansed* of all pretence (*especially those pretences about ourselves that even fool us!*) A core practice for *anyone* who wants to do *anything* genuinely good.

These are the thoughts that come to my mind on *Ascension Sunday*. Without getting all nostalgic about “*the way things were*” in the days of the apostles.... Without falling into despair or apathy about the way things seem now... I want to experience for myself ***the core*** of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. I want to be *powerful*, in the Jesus sense of the word. To prayerfully know & do what is genuinely good each day.

None of us can know for sure what the future of the Church, or even the future of our congregation, will look like – how things will change. One thing we can all know for sure, though – whether it's about the Church or about our own individual lives – is that any ***good*** change will require ***power***. A power that is real & truly beneficial. A power that, although it is not of our own making, we are each called to possess and to use. So, at the beginning of each of our days, and through all of the experiences that we have each day, why not ***embrace*** our desire to *ascend* – our desire to be *powerful* – in the Jesus sense of the word? Amen.

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