

Legalism and Ascension Day 2005, Part I

Colleagues,

Legalism and Ascension. How, pray tell, do THESE two fit together? I too wondered. Legalism was intended as the topic for today (actually in response to a request!) and then—liturgically challenged as I am—I found out at today's morning devotions that today is 40 days after Easter, the "Feast of our Lord's Ascension."

Every time this day rolls around I recall the mantra given us seminarians by "Doc" Caemmerer midway in the last century. Why did Jesus ascend? one of us novices asked. "In order to be equally close to all his disciples," Doc said. Had he stayed around in some place on earth, some could have been "closer" to him than others, and thus more easily "cling" to Jesus. [See ThTh 356 of 4 weeks ago on Mary's attempted interference with Christ's Ascension.] Now he is equidistant, better equi-present, to all his followers in proclamation and sacrament, and the rest of the means of grace.

The church's Ascension hymns hype Christ's departure as his coronation, the last phase of Easter. "The strife is o'er, the battle won." "Crowns become the victor's brow." Or in Venerable Bede's prose of a millennium and a half ago, "Christ by a road before untrod [the cross] ascends unto the throne of God."

Granted, it's all choreographed within the specs of a three-storey universe—heaven, earth, the underworld. So what? That's how they perceived the cosmos, their metaphors for how it's put together. It calls us more recent disciples with our images of big bangs and throbbing emanations with waves and quanta and

black holes, etc. to do likewise. And do our images make the universe any less mysterious? Hardly. It's even more so.

And for those whom this "primitive" cosmology still rankles, Paul Ricoeur (hardly a Luddite) proposes a "second naivete" to go beyond the first one of making cosmic metaphors literal. E.g., Christ's "descent into hell" is not akin to a tourist trip, but a statement about his victory in the realm where death has had the last word and where the Prince of Death otherwise holds sway. So how do we Easter people make the same confession in the age of the Hubble telescope?

I don't really know enough about the Hubble world to make any suggestions, but those of you for whom this might be your daily work, send in your proposals. Something like Nathan Schroeder did a few weeks ago with his venture into IT images for a theory of the atonement.

The message of the ascension, victory and coronation, is not only hype and hoopla for Jesus, but about us too. Back to the ascension hymns. One from William C. Dix.

*Alleluia! Not as orphans Are we left in sorrow now;
Alleluia! He is near us; Faith believes, nor questions how.
Though the cloud from sight received him When the forty days
were o'er,
Shall our hearts forget his promise: "I am with you
evermore"? Alleluia! Bread of heaven, Here on earth our food,
our stay;
Alleluia! Here the sinful Flee to you from day to day.
Intercessor, friend of sinners, Earth's redeemer, hear our plea
Where the songs of all the sinless Sweep across the crystal
sea.*

*Alleluia! King eternal, Lord omnipotent we own;
Alleluia! Born of Mary, Earth your footstool, heav'n your*

throne.

As within the veil you entered, Robed in flesh our great high priest,

Here on earth both priest and victim In the eucharistic feast.

Yes, that takes a bit of second naivete, but especially that last line repeats Doc Caemmerer's mantra, equi-present to all of us in the eucharistic feast. Call it "real presence."

What makes ascension a component of the Gospel, genuinely Good News, is that we are the beneficiaries of Christ's grand finale. Note Christ's "promise" in the first verse above.

Jaroslav J. Vajda does the same for us in his ascension hymn. It's a three-storied scenario, but its focus is Christ's promise about "an endless Eastertide" all tied in to the "second paraclete" that Jesus promises in the gospel of John, i.e., Pentecost. Here's the full text:

Up through endless ranks of angels, Cries of triumph in his ears,

To his heav'nly throne ascending, Having vanquished all their fears,

Christ looks down upon his faithful, Leaving them in happy tears. Death-destroying, life-restoring, Proven equal to our need,

Now for us before the Father As our brother intercede;

Flesh that for our world was wounded, Living, for the wounded plead!

To our lives of wanton wand'ring Send your promised Spirit guide;

Through our lives of fear and failure With your pow'r and love abide;

Welcome us, as you were welcomed, To an endless Eastertide.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to breathe the Spirit's grace!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to see the Father's face!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to feel the Son's embrace!

Now how to link this Ascension gospel to legalism? Well, it's clearly a contrast between good news and bad news. But I need more time to work on that. So I'll bring this to closure for this festival day and, d.v., hope to do the other half next Thursday.

Here are a couple of thoughts about that.

1. Every "-ism" is an implicit or explicit soteriology—even communism, capitalism or consumerism. "Isms" are proposals for salvation, either lower-case "s" or upper case "S."
2. Legalism is a soteriology. It is the notion of salvation we are born with. So it still vexes Christians plagued as they are by their Old Adams and Old Eves. It is an alternate to the salvation offer coming from the Ascended Lord.
3. St. Paul's argument with his Galatian Christians is precisely about that. Can Christ's promissory lordship be shared with Moses' rule-of-law in the daily life of Christ's people? Is Moses a resource for distinctively Christian ethics? I think Paul says no—for what to him are "perfectly clear" reasons.
4. The conflict in Galatians is the first recorded debate about a "third use of God's law," as Lutheran lingo puts it, in the church's history. Paul's claims that calling on Moses for guidance in following Christ—even the "good stuff" in Moses—is switching lordships. If Paul had known the English term, he'd have said legalism. It's not just a matter of ethics, but it's soteriology, an alternate notion of salvation. Therefore his grim words for Christ-

confessors who go there is: Christ died in vain.

5. Here's a paragraph from W. Elert's book THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS that deserves consideration.[It is my translation. The text for this paragraph in the existing English translation, p. 380, misses the point, I think.]

"To ask about a 'third use of the law' recapitulates once more the problem I am addressing in this entire Ethics book—the qualitative difference between ethos under law and ethos under grace. This 'third use' attempt is always made when someone views God's plan of salvation as restoring morality to the world. Or expressed in other words: when someone sees the kingdom of God to consist in God's making commands and humankind obeying them. Christ's coming then has this purpose: he pays the penalty for human disobedience, but finally brings mankind to the way of obedience. Here the law is given priority in distinguishing law and gospel. It is seen as the eternally valid communication of God's commands. The Gospel comes in as an aid for keeping the law. The gospel in a certain sense validates itself by helping believers finally achieve what they could not achieve without its assistance, namely, fulfilling the law. For this to happen, the law must tell the believers "what they ought to do." That is what the "third use" is for. Those aspects of the law which contradict the Gospel—its threat, its guilt-verdict, its demand for atonement—are viewed as no longer active because of Christ. He has wiped them away. The only thing remaining in the law's operation is that it is a "rule for living."

More on this, God willing, next time.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder