

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/21/2009, Ascension Day
Joint Liturgy at The Church of the Holy Trinity (Episcopal)
316 East 88th Street, New York, NY 10128

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come *in the same way* as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:10-11, RSV)

Let me extend warm greetings to each of you this Ascension evening. Especially I am delighted to be with the children of *The Trinity Choristers*, and I look forward with joy to their Offertory anthem later in this liturgy. You young ones should never underestimate how much you lift the hearts of us older folks. Your presence in the liturgy makes things better, makes things stronger, more beautiful, and more hopeful. So, we are all mindful of you this evening and grateful for you and your singing. In fact, I think I perceive a way to connect the anthem you are planning to sing with my main theme in this Ascension sermon. So, let me give that a try.

First off, did you notice when I just read aloud my sermon text a minute or so ago that I tried to emphasize a certain phrase in the text? The phrase was “in the same way.” Let me read it again. Two angels are speaking to the apostles. The apostles are gazing into heaven, because Jesus had just been lifted up, and a cloud had taken him out of their sight. I bet they are astonished and enthralled by this Ascension of Jesus. But the angels speak most calmly to them and let them know something very important about the future. So, let me read the text again:

¹⁰And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come *in the same way* as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:10-11, RSV)

For me, the great thing about this angelic message is their message that this world shall see Jesus again and shall see him “in the same way,” in the same manner as his disciples saw him go. It means at least this much, I believe: that you and I shall see Jesus someday in an approachable way. For that is how his disciples saw him when he ascended. He was not all thunder and lightning, not all unworldly and intimidating, not majestic and beyond human recognition, but rather he was their *friend*.

Think back to church this past Sunday. Think back to the Gospel Lesson read aloud then. It was a passage in which Jesus referred to his disciples as friends. The reading was from St. John Chapter Fifteen, and it was a beautiful reading. Jesus said this:

¹³Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:13-15, RSV)

Likewise, in this evening's Ascension readings, Jesus converses with his disciples in a friendly manner till he is taken up from them in his Ascension.

That is what we can expect someday: that this Jesus who ascended to the right hand of the Father will come again in the same manner. He departed this world with affection for his people, and he will return in the same way. He will return to you that same way. We do not know when, but at least we know this much: his return will bring joy to his people, and that you are!

So, now we turn to the interesting part for you and for me. Given that we have some kind of feel for what Jesus will be like when he returns, how should *we* be when he returns?

We have to let him go for now. He has very important work to do in heaven. In fact, the liturgy helps describes his work: He has ascended to the right hand of God the Father so that he might serve as our Great High Priest offering intercession for the world and for the church. I figure that I need all the prayers I can get. Especially I need the prayers of Jesus, because he knows my life, he knows your life, and he knows how to pray for us.

So, we have to let him go for now to do his high priestly work. But he is going to come again, and when he does, how shall we be? How shall we appear? We have a feel for how he shall be, but what of us? How should we want to be found when Jesus comes again? If he returns and catches us off guard, simply living our lives, what manner of life should we be found it that we should glad to see him and not so terribly embarrassed to be greeted by Jesus?

Well, the answer is there in your offertory hymn. We should be found to be people of love. That should be our daily garment. When we wake up in the morning and put on our clothes, our chief garment for the day should be the virtue of love.

Let me read aloud some of the words of your offertory hymn. The hymn is called *The Gift of Love*. The words and arrangement are by Hal Hopson. The hymn is a paraphrase of one of the most famous chapters in the Bible: 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter is sometimes called "The Great Love Chapter." It is a beloved reading used for weddings, and maybe you yourself will use it someday.

Mr. Hopson's paraphrase of St. Paul's passage is lovely, in my opinion. Let me read the three verses aloud:

THE GIFT OF LOVE

Though I may speak with bravest fire,
And have the gift to all inspire,
And have not love, my words are vain,
As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,
And striving so my love profess,
But not be given by love within,
The profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control,
Our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
By this we worship, and are freed.

Words: Hal H. Hopson, 1972.

Music: Traditional English melody, arranged by Hal H. Hopson, 1972

Now, it's the last two lines that especially appeal to me:

Let inward love guide every deed;
By this we worship, and are *freed*.

There is a classic and wonderful Christian notion here: that *freedom* flows from *love*. This is an unusual idea, but an idea the Church can humbly offer to the whole world. You see, ordinarily we tend to think that “freedom” consists in doing what we want. We figure we are free when we are not constrained, but can simply go ahead and do what we want. But the old Christian moral idea rather reverses this: It says that our ordinary life is a life of bondage -- bondage to fashion, to popularity, to greed, to power, to laziness -- and that the true path of freedom is to let your first concern be love. And not just any love, but love as we see it on display in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. His love is not feeble, nor weak-wristed, but is a love that dares to contend with mighty enemies, even sin, death, and the devil, is willing to sacrifice to help save others, even the horrible sacrifice of death upon a cross, and is willing to go its own way alone if need be in order to remain true to the Ten Commandments. Aye, the love of Jesus is a mighty love, and my theme is that that is the best way for us to be found when Jesus returns: We should be people of freedom, who are free precisely because we count ourselves bound to Jesus and to his way of love in this world.

Let inward love guide every deed;
By this we worship, and are *freed*.

I heard a great funeral sermon once that had a charming idea about Tom, the one who had died. The preacher pictured Tom now in heaven and approaching the throne of grace on which Jesus sits. The preacher said that he did not mean any impiety by his suggestion, but that he could hardly keep himself from imagining that as Tom approached the throne of grace, Jesus would do a “double take,” that Jesus would be stunned and puzzled and would wonder, “Am I looking in a mirror? I do believe that I see *myself* approaching me!”

A wonderful summary of Tom's life: that he had so conformed himself to Jesus and had so permitted the image of Jesus to take place in his own life, that he had begun to resemble the One he loved!

Well, that's a nice thing to be able to say at the end of a person's life -- that they had lived in such a way that they had become Christ-like. But I am saying this to *The Trinity Choristers*, who are young and setting out, and to the rest of us too: Going forward, from this evening through the rest of our lives, let us seek to be found in the ways of love when our Ascended Lord Jesus returns to this earth. He will return in a friendly way, continuing his life of love. Let us be found seeking to resemble Him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.