

ASCENSION AND RETURN

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“This ... Jesus ... shall ... come in like manner...” Acts 1, 11

“The word is very (near)” Deuteronomy 30, 14

Near to whom? Us, the church, but a church that is not a sacred place, nor stones either, but faces and biographies. The Word is near because it is an instrument of communication, so it humanizes us with its double face of listening, which is a knowing, and dialogue, which is the meeting of two different words (DIA and LOGOS) within the common territory of the logos, of understanding.

The Word is also near because it precedes us. It has to do with us even before we are aware of it. It is near also because the Word creates interlocutors. It sets them up and enables them to answer or listen. This is the Word that creates, awakens and gives birth to faith, a Word which comes before ideas, and also before its worst end-product — namely, concepts.

Can there be, though, a Word more distant than Ascension? Is it not tantamount to a dispersion in the skies, to the abandonment of history for the sake of embracing the language of myth? This Word, which is near, comes to us, the church today, and remains as if suspended and incomplete. This is because it is not understandable within our horizon of common sense.

The Word, which has asked to be followed and experienced, seems to remain suspended and incomplete inside the cloud's concealment, very distant. Ascension is in contradiction with sequel: the disciples are men and women who cannot follow Jesus into the cloud, for it is a sign of the mysterious presence of God, of His being there as if He were not there.

What then remains of the Word? An enigmatic utterance spoken by the angels: “This same Jesus .

. . shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” This returning of Jesus is the nearness of the Word which “always and constantly” comes to us, the church. The Word which speaks to us and helps us to become listeners.

A psalmist boldly proclaims: “I will throw myself into the hands of the eternal listener.” The Word that is near makes listeners of us, that is, it leaves a trace of itself in our flesh and in our mind. It leaves marks which will later be the cradle of faith, the constancies of life, the quiver of feeling and of understanding of truth — that is, the Word itself.

The Word, which is near, reaches us, people who answer, and the answer that the Word awakens is called faith — faith which, in the first place, is not idea, knowledge, contents or notion, but a mark that the Word leaves by itself, and a feeling that Luther called “trust.”

When the Word has created in us the wisdom of listening and the patience of dialogue with God (prayer, confession of faith and of sin, proclamation of hope), it penetrates into the unfathomable depth of our being and heals the deep wound of our existence, the mortal wound of sin.

So the Word is fulfilled in us, it awakens faith which gives birth to salvation as the gift of grace. Listening and answer are the two aspects of this event of Ascension and constant return which on the day of the Ascension we proclaim in the church — the church that is faces, minds, biographies and feelings.

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