

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Great Threshold

The threshold of Heaven is a tremendous and terrible place to stand. In Newman and Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* the soul of the newly-dead Gerontius ascends within earshot of the angelic liturgy of heaven, and stops in his tracks, pleading to his guardian angel to take him away to a safe place, to prepare better for the awesome crossing of that divide. It's the most persuasive argument for the existence of Purgatory that I know.

### The Prophet Isaiah

Visionary Isaiah stood on that threshold, and gazed upwards at a mighty Figure - enthroned, and surrounded by the seraphim; and he said he was ready to die, his eyes having looked upon the Lord of Hosts: "I am a man of unclean lips, of a people of unclean lips". At this the seraph seizes a coal from the altar of incense, and uses it to purge the lips of the prophet. Then Isaiah becomes ready to receive his prophetic calling, and replies humbly: *Here I am. Send me.*

### Life Beyond Death

The threshold of eternity is what we cross at our death, leaving behind everything that is passible and temporal. The Solemnity we keep (on the wrong day, I have to say) today is the day on which we contemplate the passing of Jesus across this threshold. Its description is pretty crude and can easily be mocked. Jesus doesn't blast off into the upper atmosphere like a skyrocket: that description of him (*and a cloud took him from their sight*) is a theatrical expression of a deep spiritual truth. He is passing from the temporal, dying world into the uncreated space of God, which is the Eternal. We can't possibly express that in any earthly terms, and therefore Luke uses a piece of theatre. If you read today's account in the *Acts of the Apostles* alongside that in Luke's *Gospel*, you see that they don't even obey each other; the Gospel sets the story on Easter night, in the dark; the Acts in daylight, forty days after Easter. If Luke thought he could write both stories, and still make sense, I suppose I should forgive the Bishops for thinking it can be celebrated on Sunday instead of Thursday.

### Going To The Father

What we celebrate in the Ascension is Jesus' return to the Father with his earthly task accomplished. It is a theme of triumph, and

therefore a majestic ascent of the heavens is called-for, which parallels stories like Jesus' walking on the sea, or the parting of the waters of the sea in Exodus: we are contemplating a transition which changes our humanity, and therefore the only possible language for it is the miraculous.

### Let The Lord Enter In!

The imagery has to be awesome, but it has to be understood as *our* Ascension, the ascent of human nature into the Divine life. Every story of human beings hitting beyond their strength, being raised above their station, comes into play. A man is acceding to the life of glory; the gates of the heavens are opened, and the Messiah enters into the full light of the heavenly spaces, where the Father is all in all. Such a royal progress is beyond the imagining of earthly minds. But it is released by the same principle from obeying earthly rules about time and space. It doesn't matter what day it is said to happen. From an earthly perspective, time is important, sometimes determining the truth of what comes to pass. But from the perspective of eternity, time doesn't exist, and whatever is true in eternity is true forever, and has been so always. So the moving *drama* of the redemption is all ours: the Nativity play, the Miracle play, the Passion play all have their relevance in our eyes. But the truth they express in eternity is the unchanging truth of the life of God, which is serene and unaltered, and not hampered in a linear story requiring time for its unfolding.

### The Fullness That Fills Creation

With Scripture fulfilled, with the utter glory of God poured out into the life of a human being, there is no need for Jesus to have a future. He is in eternity, and from his place there is no further travelling to be done. He has inherited once more the fulness of divinity; and we have no more questions to ask him. We know now "where he is going", and we know him as our Way. This sense of completion, of assurance, is the gift of this feast; and if anything could enhance its spiritual meaning, it would be the poetry of flight, of free ascension, of the weightless mastery of the heavens. This aerial freedom has about it the fulfilment of the spring: the threshold of fruition. The creation has blossomed, and will fruit. *Fr Philip*