

I Am The Way

No-one has gone up to heaven, except the one who came down from heaven: the Son of Man (*versions add: who is in heaven*).

There is a sense in which Jesus has left behind his glory. He has not in any sense left behind his nature as “the Son who is close to the Father’s heart” (*prologue*); he is always Son of God first and last, and his earthly manhood adds nothing to him, because nothing can be added to the fulness that is the divine life. Divine life is *existence properly so called*, and everything distinct from it is distinguished by its falling short of fulness. Humanity is a *mode* of being, but it is a mode which is made possible by the subtracting of divine qualities: it is not eternal, but dies: it is not omniscient, but learns; it is not autonomous, but dependent; it is not almighty, but weak; it is not omnipresent, but localised in a body: and so on.

When Jesus elects to live a human life, it is a choice to empty out divine qualities of living; but he does not for all that cease to be Son of God. His limitation is accepted in obedience, which is his divine quality as Son. This “condescension” of the Son is incarnation, the taking of flesh; and we are prone to think of that as “becoming real” because we are so enmeshed in bodily reality, and obsessed with its conditions: we find it most difficult to imagine a fulness of life which is not expressed in bodily terms. *They were filled with alarm and fright, and thought they were seeing a ghost*; we share their puzzlement as we stand on the margins of humanity, and try to imagine into earthly language the transcendent life of God. Even as we do this we transgress the First Commandment, trying to *make an earthly image, to worship it*.

The Incarnation is a vast concession to our weakness, precisely because we can’t get across the divide between human life and the limitless eternal. But it is not for all that a terminus; *do not cling to me, for I have yet to ascend to my Father* is only one of the features of the Easter Jesus that disappoints a human response. His very absence from their sight, the failure to *restore* what they had before the Cross, calls them to set out on a journey to find him, as if they were being called from their fishing-boats into a deeper following. And this makes possible the dialogue in today’s Gospel: *I am going now to prepare a place for you: you know the way to the place where I am going: I am the Way*.