

SERMON, ST JOHN'S EASTER 7 OR ASCENSION SUNDAY

In the year 1061, so the tradition goes, Lady Richeldis, an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman in Norfolk, England, was transported during a religious ecstasy by the Virgin Mary to Nazareth in the Holy Land. There the Virgin showed her the house where the Holy Family once lived and where, of course, the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel took place. Mary gave Richeldis the task of building a replica of the "Holy House" in her village of Walsingham and this "Holy House" became a major destination of pilgrims for many centuries - the Virgin of Walsingham was so venerated by the English people that England became known throughout the Christian world as "Our Lady's Dowry." Needless to say, at the Protestant Reformation, when many Catholic devotional practices were suppressed, the Holy House of the Virgin of Walsingham was destroyed and her image was taken to London and burnt in a massive public ceremony.

The shrine was rebuilt and re-established as a pilgrim site early in the 20th century and today it is thronged once again with devout Anglicans and Catholics who go to pay homage to the Virgin. Within the shrine, in the Chapel of the Ascension, can be found one of the most humorous works of Christian art I have ever seen. Now, there are plenty of funny, kitschy, works of Christian art: dashboard Jesuses with nodding heads, glow-in-the-dark Virgin Marys, saints in a myriad of poses depicting their elaborate tortures. This one, however, takes the cake! Out of a circle of clouds in the Ascension chapel ceiling two plaster feet poke out. We are looking up at our Lord, wounded feet garishly painted red, ascending into the clouds of heaven, a very literal rendition of the great theological truth of Jesus' leave-taking from this sphere of being. All spiritual truths are painfully difficult to render in art and often depict symbolic events crudely and humorously, but the Ascension is possibly the most difficult of all! The Ascension Chapel at Walsingham is an especially egregious example, but even those exquisite Renaissance and Baroque paintings of the Ascension in Italy, though tasteful, have a ridiculous quality. Is this a rocket taking off at Cape Canaveral? A helium balloon released by a child at the County fair? Was Jesus really surrounded by hundreds of saints, angels and tiny winged putti (cherubs) as he flew skyward in swirling clouds and rainbows? Is that how it really happened? Is heaven really up there? Unfortunately, the event, possibly more than any other in the Biblical narrative, conflicts with modern sensibilities, for contemporary cosmographies find the "heaven up there" world-view of our ancestors impossible to embrace. Most of us are with one of the first Soviet cosmonauts, who when blasted into space, sarcastically commented that he was surprised to find no God "up there." This explains why we often avoid celebrating this festival at all – it's just too weird!

There must be a good reason, however, why the 4th century bishop and theologian, Cyril of Alexandria, referred to the Ascension as "the Queen of all Christian Festivals." It can, after all, be understood to represent the culmination of the work of Christ, whereby the Lord who was in his lifetime present and accessible to a favored few, through the coming of the Holy Spirit, makes his dwelling place within us all. As such, today as we celebrate Ascension, we build on the theme of my sermon last week: we are all temples of God, shrines of the divine. More importantly, as Easter Orthodox theology most beautifully emphasizes, on this festival we

commemorate the drawing of humanity into the heart of God. Indeed, a fully incarnational theology celebrates the divinization of all creation, the bringing of all things into the divine presence. Not exactly a Cape Canaveral take-off, but an affirmation that we, and all God's creatures, are by nature divine. As St. Athanasius put it, "God became man so that man might become God." This, he said, is the fruit of the work of Christ. As Pope Leo the Great of Rome wrote in the 5th century: "Truly it was a great and indescribable source of rejoicing when, in the sight of the heavenly multitudes, the nature of our human race ascended over the dignity of all heavenly creatures, to pass the angelic orders and to be raised beyond the heights of archangels. In its ascension it did not stop at any other height until this same nature was received at the seat of the eternal Father, to be associated on the throne of the glory of that One to whose nature it was joined in the Son... Since the Ascension of Christ is our elevation, and since, where the glory of the Head has preceded us, there hope for the body is also invited, let us exult, dearly beloved, with worthy joy and be glad with a holy thanksgiving." The union with the divine contemplated by the mystics is our destiny – we are truly bound for glory! As Jesus says in today's Gospel, "I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory."

You may have noticed that this is a favorite theological theme of mine, this understanding that if we are made divine in Christ, then we must see the face of God in our fellow sisters and brothers, indeed, in the face of all creation. But here's a problem with this optimistic faith and it's a serious problem that I can't avoid facing in the light of the horrific events that unfold before our very eyes in the daily news. How can I maintain optimism in the truth of divinity in the face of all humanity when confronted with the profound evil of a young man who walked into Rooms 111 and 112 of Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and in cold blood murdered 19 children and their teachers? They were watching "Lilo and Stitch!" How can I have such optimism when I learn that an elected official actually said that this sacrifice was worth it to preserve our Second Amendment rights? How can I rest complacent and celebrate any kind of Easter joy when I learn that the leading cause of death for children in this country is being shot with a gun? My generally optimistic liberal faith flies out the window when I am confronted with such genuine evil. Remember, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus?" Well, I need to hear, "Yes, Andrew, there is evil in this world, there is a Devil!" This man who perpetrated this unfathomable evil belongs, not exalted to the right hand of God on high, but in Dante's Nine (and ultimate) Circle of Hell, a frozen waste that contrasts with the general image of hell as a fiery pit. The souls thrown there are trapped in the ice of a huge frozen lake: "The treachery of these souls was the denial of the Love which is God and of all human compassion and warmth. Only the remorseless dead center of the ice will serve to express their natures. As they denied God's Love, so they are furthest removed from the light and warmth of His Sun." My optimistic nature, coupled with my still unshaken conviction that God is Perfect Love finds it impossible to comprehend that God will send any soul to hell. But perhaps we must all accept the fact that even God cannot stand in the way of those who choose hell, not only for themselves, but for others too.

I have often had people tell me that when a priest or minister responded to difficult faith questions, with "Ah that's a mystery," they thought that such an answer was a cop-out. In so many ways, of course, it is, but truthfully, you would be very suspicious of me and respect me even less if I spouted pious platitudes to explain the evil we have witnessed this week. Often, there are no easy answers, nor should there be. However, I think of the courage of that little girl,

Miah Cerillo, who played dead under the body of her classmate and smeared her own face with the boy's blood to avoid detection by the killer. I think of those children who risked their own lives by fearlessly dialing 911 while the killer continued to shoot their friends, despite the fact that those who were meant to save them were too afraid to enter that room to do so. When we act to stand for love and life, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, we stand for the ultimate triumph of good over evil. There is so much you and I can do here and now: as the old cliché puts it (and, yikes, it is a cliché, but nonetheless true!), "Don't curse the darkness, light a candle!" Let's not pretend to have an easy answer to the reasons why these evil bastards do the terrible things they do, and let's continue fearlessly to question how this evil is compatible with our conviction that God is Love. However, I won't let this guy take away my firm belief that all creation is made glorious in divinity by virtue of the work of Christ. I will not cease to hold that you and I are reflections of the beauty of God. I won't stop from living my life with the optimistic vision of our glorious destiny. For, we are, indeed, bound for glory! Who would've thought that those tasteless and tacky feet sticking out of a ceiling could hold such promise!