

"To Make a Beginning"

A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at General Theological Seminary on January 30, 1988, for the Reception of the Promises of the Members, Companions and Associates of the Order of the Ascension

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from. --T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

Two days ago, as I was thinking about coming up from Washington to New York for this occasion, I realized that my beard was getting a bit shaggy so I telephoned the barber shop for a haircut and a trim. "Come right on over," the young barber said. He and his wife are new to Silver Spring, having set up shop last year, just a month or two before I arrived in town. This was our first meeting so we chatted a bit and I told him I was going to the City to preach at a very special occasion and wanted to look sharp. When he finished he said, "You have a good trip now." I felt moved to explain the occasion to him further, so I said, "Thank you. I'm going to preach at the service where some friends of mine make promises, take vows. You know. ..become monks." His eyes widened. "Well," I went on to say, "not exactly monks in the old-fashioned sense. They won't be living in a cloister but working in the world. Some of them are married!" His mouth fell open. The more I tried to explain, the more I confused the poor man. "My friends are forming a society of mission priests. They live in the world to do the Lord's work, but they live in the world under VOWS, like monks. You know?" He didn't, and by that time I wasn't sure I did either. He shook his head, wondering' no doubt what these white boys would get up to next. "You have a good trip now," he said.

It's not only confusing to participate in a celebration of the reception of the promises of the members, companions and associates of the Order of the Ascension, it's positively awesome. We are witnessing the foundation of a new Anglican religious order. It is an important event. But in order to value the reality of the moment, perhaps we need to let go of our sense of the historic occasion, and think about what it all means. It is not yet altogether clear, but then perhaps it need not be. The future is unknown, and thank God for that. I want to focus on three themes today, and I hope these three themes will be of use in the continuing discernment of the life of this community that is now coming into being. The themes are, first, the theme of vocation: the vocation of the Christian in baptism, the vocation of the Christian priesthood, and the Christian's vocation to heaven. Second, I want to speak of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ as the leading metaphor of the life of the Order of the Ascension. You have chosen this name, and the theme goes with you. Finally, I want to speak with you about friendship. Your Order grows out of the friendship of men and women who have worked together in ministry. A religious community is a community of friends. And all Christians have friendship with God as their ultimate vocation and end.

First, the vocation. We live in a time when people do not have a clear understanding of what a religious community is, as my conversation with the barber reminds us. Indeed, we lack a clear sense of what Christian community itself might be for us. Yet paradoxically, ours is a time in which people are desperate for community. We live in a Church in which people go to seminary in order to learn to be Christians. Think about that. When people want to think seriously about God, to study the Scriptures, to participate in a community of Eucharist and

fellowship, to pray, to serve the poor and the cause of justice and peace we pack them off to seminary to become priests. Yet this is precisely the baptismal vocation of all Christians. It is parishes, not seminaries, that should be the training ground of Christians!

The vocation of the Order of the Ascension, insofar as it has now been discerned, and open as it is to the calling of God as you enter the unknown future, is a priestly vocation, that is, a vocation of and to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Your task will be, I suspect, so to proclaim the Word and offer to others in the parishes and communities you serve as priests the grace of God that they may be drawn not to you but to Christ, not to self but to sacrifice, not to a particular form of Church structure, such as a religious order, but to friendship with God. You are at a beginning now, but that beginning is (like all beginnings) also an end. The end of your long and rigorous period of preparation, of discernment, of planning and praying about founding an Order, is the beginning of the life of the Order in the Church and the world. As you move ever more deeply into your own friendship with God, which arises in the context of your friendship for one another, you will be drawn into ways and missions that you little dream of now. And perhaps into structures that you can scarcely imagine. Do not be afraid to follow the vocation wherever it leads, to follow Christ to Calvary and to the mount of the Ascension, into the life of God. Today you dare to accept the friendship to which Christ calls you, to share in the life of the Blessed Trinity. Don't be afraid. You will receive power to do the work Christ calls you to, the work of the Kingdom of God.

Which brings me to the second theme, the image of the Ascension as the metaphor of your community, the image of your relationship with God. If the whole idea of a religious community is bizarre in twentieth century America, the Ascension is even more bizarre for most of us. We worry too much about the physical details, not because we are so committed to an incarnational focus on the world and the flesh into which Christ comes, but because we can't get our noses off the ground. We fear to lift our eyes to heaven! And so we miss the Gospel in its full meaning. Let us be clear that the God who created the universe and brought human life to flower on this planet can raise men and women from the dead and take them into intimate relationship with the Divine Being in whatever way God chooses. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" But the New Testament writers are not terribly interested in the physical details of the Ascension. In Acts the disciples see Jesus "lifted Up" and taken out of their sight by a cloud. They remember the cloud as the one which appeared on Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration. They recognize the cloud as a sign of God's gracious presence. They know that God is taking Jesus back into heaven "that he might fill all things," in order to be able to send the Spirit, the promise of the Father, upon the Church to enable ~ to preach the Kingdom Jesus has inaugurated and entrusted to our hands. ; Jesus cautioned them to "stay in the city, *to wait upon God* in prayer before entering upon their mission, and in everything they did to be *dependent upon God* for their power and their being, for action and essence. It is in the city we shall find God, in the reality of our everyday life. We will not find God except among the poor and the oppressed, where Christ calls us to be, to wait for his coming again with those who know their need of God.

Christ reigns in heaven that we may serve on earth. Christ has ascended because God came down to share our human life. We are called into the city, among the poor, in order that all may be lifted up to God. It remains to ask why the metaphor of above and below, height and depth, coming down and ascending, is used to express this central truth of the Christian revelation. And the reason is, I think, because it is a category of our human nature. Not only

our language, our cultural forms, but the human mind itself finds expression in this metaphor. It is not that God comes down to us and takes us up into the Trinity because human thought is expressed in these terms, but precisely the reverse. We think this way because God is that way. It is our experience because God has put it into our being, reflecting divine Being. We have all, I imagine, experienced dreams of flying. We are on a high place, perhaps a mountain top or the roof of a tall building. We are afraid. Perhaps our flight begins involuntarily. We fall, we are fearful, and then, miraculously, we do not hit the ground but soar up into the sky. There is a feeling of great power in this dream, of tremendous confidence. We learn to trust ourselves. Our flight is effortless, our action perfect. The myth of Icarus' flight testifies to the universality of the human longing to be freed from limitation, to be free. In our deepest self we yearn for the experience of the birds, or the angels. And in our dreams we know the freedom of God.

The Ascension points to this, and points us to God. Something deep within us dreams of the divine humanity, of perfect freedom. Christ came among us that we might become what we dream. He came among us and was raised by the Father from the dead, and now reigns on high, above all that we can imagine. And because he has taken our humanity with him to heaven, we too shall reign in glory. We shall be friends of God. The name of the Order of the Ascension calls you into the Godhead to share the life of God. Not for yourselves alone, but for the world for which Christ died.

Finally, all human life finds its purpose and meaning, its true end, in friendship with God. The Order of the Ascension must be a vehicle for its members' becoming friends of God, and then be a way of sharing God's friendship with the Church and the world. The times are not happy ones for this aspect of your life, any more than they are right for monks or ascensions or for redemption. We modern Americans want to relativize everything, and to stand only upon our own experience. But in so doing we lose the ground we have to stand upon to understand and express our experience. We don't know anymore what we are *for*. And lacking purpose, we find our meaning tenuous, ambivalent, doubtful, and ultimately we despair. We must find our way home. We have a home. God really does call us. Our salvation is in friendship with God, because our being is there, with God. ,

Thomas Aquinas wrote that "the end of human life is felicity." happiness. The angelic doctor, as much at home in hymns to the Eucharistic Lord as in philosophical theology, as often an advisor to world leaders as a poor preacher of good news to sinners, is a good model for the Order of the Ascension. His commitment to truth led him simply to be about the Father's business and to leave us a marvel of insight that to him was of no consequence, since it had served his purpose in helping him become a friend to God. and at his end he had no further need of it. But 'in his rigorous quest for truth, he asked fearlessly what it is that would make the human being happy. He trusted there was an answer to his question and he found it, not in abstraction but in his own experience, with life, and with the Truth Himself.

There are different sorts of happiness. The happiness of politics, of accomplishing the work. The happiness of contemplation, of gazing upon the Beloved. The happiness of friendship, a mutual thing. The happiness of being friends with God. The happiness for which we humans are destined is for us supernatural, but it is natural to God. In order for us to experience this happiness, we must be able to participate in the life of God, we must become the companions

of God. We must learn to live with God in order to be able to live --with God. The means and the end are the same.

The theologian writes:

Now, that which enables one to live together with another person is chiefly friendship. ...Thus, some people go hunting together, others drink together, still others, devote themselves to philosophy, and so on.

It was consequently necessary that Some form of friendship with God be made available, so that we might live together with Him; and this is love. Now, this sharing in divine life exceeds the capacity of nature, as does the happiness to which it is directed. So, nature must be perfected for this purpose by a superadded good; and this is the essential character of this virtue. Hence, we must say that love is a theological virtue that is: *poured into our hearts b the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

St. Thomas' is not a name that is on everyone's lips in Anglican circles these days. But he was a friend of God, and we do well to be among the circle of God's friends. That is, I think, your task, as it is the task of all the baptized. And with that, the call of the baptized, I come back at the end to the beginning of this charge.

To sum up: We are created to be God's friends. God made us for that. Christ lived and died as one of us, and went into heaven to take our humanity into the very life of God, that we might become God's friends. Christian community in general, and your form of it in particular, is made *for* friendship, and *by* friendship. We are, to foster friendship with God by being friends ourselves.

This, then, is my charge to you on this special day:

Be a sign of contradiction to the world, and to the Church. In the humility that comes from community, contradict our smugness. In the self- knowledge that comes from friendship with God, contradict our arrogance. As ordained persons, set apart for the service of the altar, show us that the servant is our only guide. Kneel with Jesus.

Be a sign of hope to the world, and to the Church. In the face of the despair that you too will feel, rely on the one who has blessed you even as he was parted from you, and given you the gift of waiting, and the power that comes to the poor. As servants of the ascended Lord, dare to proclaim the good news we fear to hear yet so desperately need. Fly with Jesus.

Be a sign of love to the world, and to the Church. Be friends yourselves. You began as friends, continue in friendship. Let that beginning be your end and purpose, to be friends still with one another, and with God. Pray for the gift of martyrdom for your community. Prepare for the success that will try your faith and be a snare to your love. Fear only to be faithless. Trust the spirit within you, and the Spirit who calls you out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Be among the poor, the lonely, the outcast, the hopeless, the oppressed. There you will find Jesus, who is your friend. Stand with Jesus, and walk with him to heaven in the company of all God's friends.

--Emmett Jarrett

