

The Ascension: Recollecting the Experience¹

Anthony Kelly

Abstract: *Given the richness of the New Testament perspectives on the ascension as an event (Luke), movement (John), state (Paul) and activity (Hebrews, Revelation), this article focuses on the ascension as an experienced phenomenon, the better to exclude mythological fantasies and to prepare for a critical theological exploration—even if by definition the ascension eludes any overly ambitious systematic treatment. As a phenomenon, the ascension saturates the consciousness of faith both negatively and positively: negatively, e.g., in terms of departure, ending, invisibility, beyond-ness and otherness; positively, e.g., in terms of presence, universal accessibility, and anticipation, novelty and hope.*

Key Words: Ascension, phenomenon, phenomenality, verticality, rupture, departure, presence.

Theologically speaking, the ascension has suffered some form of benign neglect compared to other aspects of Christian faith. This has made it vulnerable to mythic fantasies that do nothing for faith or theology to the point where faith, reason and language are somewhat embarrassed. This is not to say that there are some notable exceptions.²

It might be thought, however, that the ascension of Christ is so obvious as not to provoke much questioning. After all, the ascension and exaltation of Christ are the horizon in which the whole New Testament is set (Jn 20:17; Mk 16:19; Eph 4:8-10; 1 Tim 3:16; Hb 4:14; 9:27). Within that horizon, there is a continuing dialectic, for example, of Christ's

¹ This article is based on a chapter in a larger work tentatively entitled *Faith, Church and the Ascension of Christ: The Forgotten Dimension* (forthcoming, Liturgical Press). It is preceded by the scriptural treatment of the ascension as an event (Luke), a movement (John), a state (Paul) and as an activity (Hebrews, Revelation). The phenomenological perspective opens onto subsequent chapters on the Body of Christ, the Eucharist and the Eyes of faith, before offering a more systematic theology of the ascension.

² For example, Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: on the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), and *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); José Granados, "The First Fruits of the Flesh and the First Fruits of the Spirit: The Mystery of the Ascension", *Communio* 38/2 (2011): 6-38; Brian D. Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (New York: Crossroad, 2009). For earlier influential works, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-77); J. G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958); F. X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*. Trans. Rosemary Sheed (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960); G. Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu: Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas*. Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 26 (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1971); G. Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*. trans. René Hague, (New York: Seabury Press, 1976); Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976 and 1998).

presence and his absence, of what is past and what is to come, of the time of Christ and the time of the Spirit, of sacramental realisation and eschatological fulfilment.

But there is a larger relevance to Christian experience. The ascension is that facet of the Christian mystery that is most near to those living the life of faith. St Paul, in emphasising his relationship to Christ in the present, declared, “even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (2 Cor 16). Believers in every age have no need to hanker after the earthly presence of Jesus in the Palestine of two thousand years ago. He has gone, and is now risen, and has been exalted and glorified. There is no point in gazing upward, as the heavenly figures once reminded the apostles and the generations who would profit from their witness (Ac 1:11). Faith and hope has now to be busy about other matters, to await the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the return of Jesus at the end of time (see Ac 1:5, 11).

In the meantime, the ascension constantly frustrates any theological system. A desirable attitude would try to allow for a full play of interweaving considerations pertinent to this particular salvific event (and article of the creed), and yet hold it apart from the mundane phenomena of a gravity-defying type to which it is too often reduced. In terms of faith and phenomenology, the event must be allowed to appear in its own right,³ and theology must develop appropriate receptivity to the biblical depictions of the ascension in order to appreciate their experiential depth and salvific significance. Before faith seeks understanding, it must first absorb what has been given into, and received by, its consciousness. What theology takes for granted must be first of all taken *as granted* in a particular way.⁴ After all, the data of theology deal primarily with the grace, the gift of God, and God’s self-communication. First, then, a word on the gift-like character of theological data.

1. THE THEOLOGICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE:

Speaking generally, a phenomenological approach aims for the mind to be freshly “struck”, as it were, by the sheer originality of what has occurred and the way it is or was experienced—in its arresting and particular otherness. In a theological perspective, the *data*—the given content of experience—derive from the *donum*—the gift that comes with a giving and from a giver beyond any worldly horizon. Mundane horizons of the possible, the real and the knowable, are interrupted by a vertical in-breaking of an event “not of this world.” It is not surprising, therefore, that the religious or theological dimension is insignificant to mentalities enclosed in their own narrowness. What is lost is that other dimension—the vertical dimension of the height and depth of experience.⁵ This exceeds a

³ A phenomenological prelude to systematic exposition has the advantage of precluding a false opposition between the epistemological—that is, the resurrection and ascension simply manifest the transcendent character of the revealed Word)—and the ontological—that is, these events are real in themselves and part of the objective unfolding of God’s saving action. On this point, see Douglas Farrow, “Karl Barth on the Ascension: An Appreciation and Critique”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2/2 (2000):127-150.

⁴ For the following remarks, I am especially indebted to Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1-27. More generally, I am grateful for the contribution of such writers as Kevin Hart, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Claude Romano and others, as is evident in my previous work, Anthony J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008). See especially, 24-43.

⁵ Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 9.

purely empirical appearance or narrowly rational analysis; the settled horizons of mundane understanding and calculation are disturbed.⁶ Consequently, there is a vector of surprise and grace arising within the possibilities of human experience.⁷

In terms of Christian experience, a gift is given from beyond all human giving, from a giver who is not of this world. But receptivity to this gift presupposes the interpersonal experience of a community faith and its animating tradition formed by sacred texts, doctrines, symbols, sacraments, and examples of holiness.⁸ The Christ-event introduces a new horizon in which the transformative act of God's love affects every dimension of consciousness. It extends and reorders the scale of values and gives rise to new dimensions of meaning in our understanding of God, the self and the world. Settled horizons of expectation are upset and disrupted with the excess, both attractive and demanding, of God's self-giving in Christ. Whether unobtrusively or dramatically, consciousness is affected by the Christ-Event, so as to expand in new horizontal and vertical dimensions. As St Paul would put it, "for those who are in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). In its receptivity to the revelatory event, Christian theology is less thinking *about* some object or proposition of belief, and is more a form of thinking from *within* the experience of what is given within the community of the faithful. The first act of reflective faith is to allow the Christ Event to appear in its arresting "other-ness" and provocative power. In the receptivity of faith, the rational, all-critical ego no longer occupies centre-stage, as though "subjecting" everything to its powers of reason.⁹ Rather, the believer is the one who is "subjected" to what is graciously and provocatively disclosed to it in the paschal mystery of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension.¹⁰ This revelatory experience inspires a distinctive tradition of rationality, morality and art as its contribution to the world's history.¹¹ Human reason is not allowed to remain undisturbed in isolation from the reasons of the heart that reason cannot know. A difference enters into the creativity of human intelligence when it is affected by the love that "bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7-8).

We turn, now, from the common character of theological data as *dona* to the phenomenon of the ascension in particular.

2. THE ASCENSION AS SINGULAR PHENOMENON

The ascension is indeed a multi-faceted mystery of faith—an ending and a beginning, a fulfilment and a promise, a departure and a return, and much else besides. In a previous book on the resurrection,¹² I had occasion to refer to the many-sided phenomenon of the

⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man: A Social Phenomenology of Faith and Reality* (Philadelphia, MD: Fortress Press, 1975), is still a valuable exposition of the phenomenology of the corporate Christian reality.

⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 261.

¹⁰ See Anthony J. Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 29-42.

¹¹ An outstanding resource here is Neil Ormerod, *Meaning, Method and Revelation: The Meaning and Function of Revelation in Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology* (Lanham: University of America Press, 2000), especially 217-219.

¹² Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect*,

paschal mystery of Christ. To this end, I profited especially from the writings of Jean-Luc Marion among others. It was clear that his analysis of a number of “saturated phenomena” in throwing light on the experience of faith¹³ and its receptivity to the primordial self-giving “from above” underlying all Christian experience.¹⁴ Let us touch briefly on such phenomena, overbrimming as they do all routine boundaries and frames of reference.

*The Ascension as Revelation.*¹⁵

The phenomenon of the ascension is situated within the larger phenomenological of Christian revelation. Post-Enlightenment philosophical difficulties are well known, given that there is an entrenched speculative conviction against the very possibility of divine revelation. In the meantime, Christian faith lives in a milieu determined by the self-revelation of God in Christ. Jesus is in person the phenomenon saturating the whole of the New Testament and Christian life. He is given in a way of excess, in his death, resurrection and ascension, overbrimming and disrupting all previous categories and expectations. The world of his previous relationships is radically rearranged: the Word becomes flesh, and in that flesh, he is crucified, and raised from the dead—and ascends into heaven. The inexhaustible excess presented to faith frustrates any human expression of the event, at once within the world and yet beyond it (cf. Jn 21:25). Receptivity to the phenomenon of Christ must allow it appear in its own evidence and on its own terms. Accordingly, there is an inevitable interplay of giving and receptivity, of appearance and invisibility, of presence and absence, of the horizontal and the vertical. Yet this revelation continues to have a manifold effect in the life and mission of the Church. Though the cloud receives the ascended One and renders him “out of sight”, faith, even in this era of “not-seeing” compared to the “seeing” of privileged post-resurrectional witnesses, is not a form of blindness, let alone a commitment to nothing and a relationship to no one. The risen and ascended One, although no longer a presence within the world in the way he once inhabited it, still inspires all the “senses” of faith. Faith tastes the goodness of God and listens to the Word.¹⁶ It breathes the Holy Spirit and eats and drinks the sacramental realities of Christ’s body and blood, just as it is strengthened by the foundational testimony of privileged “eye witnesses” and the cumulative evidence of transformed lives. Through all this, the self-revealing phenomenon of Christ draws believers into its field, and summons to a conversion that is never complete in this life.

The revelatory impact of the ascension is such that it is not one act of divine self-revelation among many, but the culminating act of God’s self-revelation in Christ, and, in him, of the reconciliation of the world with God. This is to say that the ascension is a God-wrought and God-revealing event. It is saturated with everything that Jesus was, and is, and will be. It forms the horizon in which his life, death, resurrection are disclosed in terms of their universal significance. The Father’s exaltation of crucified, risen and ascended Lord over all creation occurs not as the insertion of mysterious reality into the fabric of the passing world, but as the taking up that world into the fullness of his eschatological reality.

¹³ Marion, *Being Given*, 234-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ For the various instances of “saturated phenomena” such as revelation, event, aesthetic form, face and body, see Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect*, 30-43.

¹⁶ For a theological phenomenology of voice, see Sergio Gaburro, *La Voce della Rivelazione. Fenomenologia della Voce per una Teologia della Rivelazione* (Milano: Edizioni San Paolo, 2005).

The Ascension as Event

The revelatory impact of the ascension cannot be separated from its occurrence as an event.¹⁷ Something happened; and when something of great significance happens, it possesses a singular and expanding impact. Its meaning is not to be found in previous notions of the real or the possible, for the “excess” overflows any calculus of cause and effect. The origin and emergent influence of such a happening can never be fully grasped.¹⁸ Great tragedies overflow the bounds of rationality,¹⁹ just as, in a more positive vein, the historical emergence of Christianity and its connection to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is world-shaping in its proportions. Rational attempts to reduce such events to a circumscribable object cannot cope with the overwhelming character of what has taken place. When a truly revelatory event occurs beyond all previous calculations, it intimately involves those caught up in it. The world of one’s previous life is reconfigured, and made newly meaningful and significant. It inspires a manifold change, and even a radical conversion of mind, heart and imagination—either through faith in Christ as in this instance, or in many other forms of religious experience, or as a momentous breakthrough in the worlds of science, art or law and government.

Momentous events give rise to a certain “anarchy”, as the fixed points of previous horizons are dramatically shifted. The full significance of what has happened can emerge only with time and in patiently awaiting the future to unfold.²⁰ When such an event takes place, the only possible response is not one of projecting new possibilities onto an already rationally established world, but of becoming involved in a world made new and newly understood outside any previous horizon.²¹ Something new has been born.²²

The ascension of the crucified and risen One is world-changing event. The death-bound horizon of human destiny now changes into an anticipation of a reconciled future of life with God in the communion of saints. In the risen and ascended One, our humanity is taken up to be with God, and the world itself is viewed in the light of him who is the first-born of all creation and firstborn from the dead (Col 1:15-18). Such is the boundless and transforming power of this radical event, that Paul can write, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5:17).

The Ascension as Aesthetic Form

Beauty has a distinctive attractive and transforming effect. A work of art, say, a great painting, in striking us with its particular splendour, frames the world in a new way, while overflowing the capacities of any particular perception of it. It cannot be merely a tasteful adornment to the décor of a room, for its aesthetic impact causes everything to be re-arranged in the living-space of our routine experience. It invites an endless contemplation in ways that go beyond the flat manner of looking at—or possessing—any ordinary

¹⁷ Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect*, 32-33.

¹⁸ Marion, *Being Given*, 140, 165, 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁰ Claude Romano, *L'événement et le monde*. Épithée. Essais Philosophiques (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 60-69.

²¹ Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 8-10, 37-39.

²² Romano, *L'événement et le monde*, 72-96.

object.²³ Those who are receptive, with their varying sensitivities and appreciative capacities, enter into the world framed by the picture, for example, and so see the world afresh. The artist does not so much depict an arresting object within the routine scope of cultural vision as disclose something or some dimension in the light of something other and something more.

The revelatory event of the ascended Christ is first of all a glory,²⁴ a beauty, and with its own attractive force: “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:12). Christ crucified, risen and ascended comes as a *Gestalt*, an irreducibly concrete, whole and complete form. It is not only a matter of seeing this form, for it also invites participation in the whole of the Christian mystery.²⁵ The risen and ascended One transcends the world of expression and draws those who receive him into the world of the gift, into a universe of grace, into the excess of self-giving and to the original and ultimate Giver.²⁶

The Ascension and the body

The contemplation of faith at this point must its incarnational focus. Negatively speaking, the Ascension does not mean the end of the incarnation suggesting “ex-carnation” or disembodiment. More positively, it is because of the resurrection and the ascension that the incarnation expands to its God-willed proportions. The incarnation is an expanding event. With Christ the head, and Christians its members, the Body of Christ grows through history to new dimensions of incarnation and embodiment. But how might this be understood further? In the search for an appropriate analogy, we note how the phenomenon of the body or “the flesh” is not merely a material or biological entity, but the zone of interweaving, incarnated relationships.²⁷ Experience “in the flesh” affects and is affected by the larger phenomenon of the world. For the flesh—embodied existence—is at once an original bonding with the world, an immediate exposure to it, an immediate participation in it, and a primal communication within it.

Now, the ascension does not mean the dissolution of the incarnation. The flesh, the body of Christ, with all its individuality is still, even in this time of the ascension, God’s chosen field of communication. Though now transformed, his risen and ascended body continues in its original connection with the material universe, and in primal communication with all embodied persons—in order that they be embodied in the new creation as he himself embodies it. He bears our humanity into heaven, into the realm of life in God. The ascension, then, does not mean a removal or dissolution of the incarnation into the infinite distance separating the divine realm from the human. It is rather an indication of the expansive reality of the incarnation, and of the eternal reconciliation of the divine and the human.

²³ Marion, *Being Given*, 203.

²⁴ Theology is indebted to Hans Urs von Balthasar as in his *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*. Trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis. Joseph Fessio, SJ and John Riches (eds.) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), for attempting to restore an aesthetic dimension into the heart of faith.

²⁵ Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 467.

²⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 334, et passim.

²⁷ Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection*, 130-148; 150-177.

The Ascension and the Face of Christ

Before adverting to the phenomenon of the manner in which Christ “faces” the community of faith, we note the more general case of the face paradoxically making visible the invisible totality of the other. The face resists objectification. At the same time, this “you” calls for a respect and regard, in such a way as to render inhuman any gaze that is just a mere “looking at”, as in the inspection of a material object. To see the face of the other—as in “eye to eye” contact or face-to-face communication—is to find that the centre of gravity is shifted. It is not centred *here*, as in the perception of the self-regarding ego (which may well “look through” the other). Rather, the centre is *there*, in the other, whose look can stop us in our tracks. In this sense, the face of the other is a commanding presence.²⁸ It does not reflect back to me what I desire to possess or dominate. It takes me out of myself, into the disturbing world of responsibility, respect, love and awe. To that degree, the face is not a mirror in which I see myself, but more a window through which the light of arresting otherness breaks through.

As regards the face of Christ and the manner in which he “faces” the Church, it must be admitted that the New Testament, neither when speaking of the risen Jesus, nor at any stage in his earthly life, shows any interest in describing his face in any conventionally physical terms. Icons, of course, and the long tradition of Christian art, have sought to serve revelation and faith by expressing the face behind the biblical accounts of Jesus’ deeds, words and relationships with others. The best artistic expression seeks to evoke an experience of the face of Christ as the image of the self-revealing God. Paul speaks expansively of Christ, “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). But the otherness of the transcendent must be allowed to appear on its own terms – looking us in the face, rather than being a projection from our own limited viewpoints.²⁹ Faith’s perception of the face of Christ calls for adoration, self-surrender and the discernment of his face in the suffering other. It enjoins patience and longing for the final appearance of the ascended One—as in the earliest recorded Christian prayer, Maranatha, “Come, Lord!” (1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20).

In that christophanic moment of his return, the true face of Jesus Christ will be revealed, in his identity and his mission, as the crucified, risen and ascended Jesus, the exalted embodiment of God’s self-giving love: “They shall look upon the one whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37). But, in a bold Pauline idiom, there is already a kind of experience of the face of Christ turned toward the believer in a light from beyond this world: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine forth out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Faith does not wait in vain, looking up into heaven, but moves out into the world in which the glory of God has been manifest—as it awaits the return of ascended Christ.

To summarise:

As a phenomenon of revelation, the ascension represents the culminating moment in the God-given mission of Jesus. As an event, this phenomenon saturates in its intensity and expansiveness faith’s vision of the world and its destiny. As a phenomenon of divine beauty, the ascension manifests the inauguration of a new age of hope founded on the

²⁸ Marion, *Being Given*, 216.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

glorification of the Crucified. In the flesh and body of the risen and ascended One, our own embodied existence has already entered the realm of an eternal life of communion with God. On the face of the risen and ascended Jesus, faith discerns, in a clouded way, the glory of God's self-revelation and of human existence in the sight of God.

Whatever the various ways in which phenomenon of the ascension appears in the New Testament, there is a continuing dialectic of presence and absence. We pass, then, to this next section.

3. PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: VARIOUS ASPECTS

The inherent indeterminacy of the ascension in regard to the routine conditions of earthly existence is not simply a negative factor, for it opens up, from above and from below, a distinctively holy space, as it were.³⁰ In this, the experience of faith is caught up in an interplay of the absence and presence of Christ.³¹ It is a space spanning an infinite distance, but in every respect shaped in the form of him who “descended” from above, who once walked this earth, breathed the air of this planet, spoke a human language, proclaimed the Reign of God. This boundless space is shaped in the form of him who suffered betrayal, condemnation, torture and crucifixion—who died and was buried. But this space is not one of infinite darkness, for it is luminous in the light of his rising from the tomb, his subsequent self-disclosure to chosen witnesses, and his eventual ascent to the God from whom he came—and the promise of his return.

Though Jesus is now absent in contrast “to the days of his flesh” (Hb 5:7), though he has been “taken up” from this world and its conditions, the holy space of his ascension unfolds as a field of vital communication between Christ and his followers. To that degree, the ascension initiates a charged realm of presence in the here-and-now of each life, and of each generation and era of the Church. The ascension figures as the “updraught” of God's action in Christ, drawing believers to him in his ascended state—and thereby changing mundane understandings of space, time, body and presence. The ascended Christ occupies a region of divine accessibility in which all times are now contemporaneous with him, and all places open to his presence.

As regards the singular phenomenon of the ascension, a fourfold negation is implied. First, there is Jesus' departure, and his being taken out of sight by divine initiative. Invisibility is the result inherent in the departure of the ascended One into the realm of God. Secondly, not only is there an empirical negation implied in this invisibility and departure, but also a figurative or symbolic negation, in that the overbrimming phenomenon of the ascension exceeds previous symbolic referents to time, space, body, movement, presence, and so forth. Thirdly, there is no conceptual hold on what the ascension of Christ might mean save in terms of his exaltation, glorification and the accomplishment of his mission. The disciples' silent gaze upward is interrupted, and

³⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976 [pb 1998]), pioneered new approaches to time and space in relation to the resurrection and ascension. See especially 126-139, 179-193.

³¹ Robinette, *Grammars of Resurrection*: note the subtitle of this fine work, *A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence*. The interweaving of these aspects impressively pervades the whole book in its treatment of eschatology, resurrection, saturated phenomenon, body, sacrament and selfhood, etc.—even if, as already mentioned, there is little explicit reference to the ascension.

settles into the joy of inarticulate silence, and then in ecstatic praise (Lk 24:51-53). The new has been revealed. Jesus' departure means that he is not "here" in the previous sense; not "there" because he is out of sight in the everywhere of divine presence; and though never to be held or possessed or subject to human control, he has gone in order to come again. Fourthly, the ascension of Jesus to the divine realm "beyond this world" means that he is no longer constrained by the limits of his previous existence, but more, that he has entered into a realm of transcendent giving—a giving and a sending of the Holy Spirit beyond any human capacity to give or produce. These four negativities inherent in the ascension serve to disclose the transcendent "otherness" of God's presence and action in Christ.

The ascension, nonetheless, is not to be interpreted just as a *departure*, i.e., as though Jesus abandons his faithful disciples and leaves them bereft of his presence. Departure it surely is, but a departure for the sake of his continuing mission, finally to be realised in his return as the consummation of history. This is expressed in various ways: for example, he goes ahead to prepare a place for those who are to follow (Jn 14:1), just as his going occasions the sending of "the other paraclete" (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Such a departure leads into a space and time of expectation of his final coming.

The negation of "seeing", however, does not require that faith be forever fabricating a collage of visual images drawn from mundane experience as a substitute for its deficiencies. Faith has its own senses (1 Jn 1:1-4) and its experience of the presence of Christ (e.g. Jn 14:23; 15:4-5; 17:2-21). Though the ascension discloses his incalculable otherness, he remains, and never departs from, the here-and-now of faith. He is *here* in the fullness of who he is, of what he has done, in the accomplishment of his mission—and in the sending of his Spirit, and the promise of his return.

Rupture

Undoubtedly, there is an element of rupture in regard to Jesus' previous modes of presence and self-disclosure. Something has ended: Jesus is assumed into the divine realm from which he came. He is no longer locatable in the ordinary conditions of life—and death—in this world. The horizontal range of expectation has been vertically disrupted. Previous modes of presence and even of self-revelation to chosen witnesses have come to an end. And yet with this aspect of rupture, there is an irruptive aspect to this phenomenon of ascension—the occurrence of an unpredictable novelty. Whether we term it "revelation" or "epiphany", the ascension is not an event occurring as a horizontal outworking of any given state of affairs. In contract, it is given in a "vertical" and, therefore, disruptive fashion.³²

There are cognitive consequences: the ascension as a phenomenon precludes any attitude pretending to possess or comprehend what is being given or revealed. Any predetermined stock of signs, ideas and definitions is rendered inadequate and deferred to some final revelation. But what is already given is received as an ever-original and inexhaustible event in the economy of God's self-communication as it unfolds "for us and our salvation."

³² Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 9-10.

Certainly, there is an ending. But what does this ending consists in? Jesus is no longer walking the earth, for he is dead and buried—even though the tomb is empty. Further, the risen One is no longer with the early disciples as he once was or as he showed himself in the “forty days” leading up to the ascension. And yet the ascension does not constrict the freedom of the Christ in revealing himself. He can still choose to appear to Saul on the way to Damascus, and, in a different mode, to John on the island of Patmos. Clearly, too, the ascension does not imply any cessation of Christ’s eucharistic presence, nor does it weaken his assurance of being with the Church until the closing of the age. The earliest experience of the ascension unfolds, through phases of rupture, departure, fulfilment of mission and sending of the Spirit, to the cosmic expansion of his presence, and thence to the promise of his return. The Spirit is given, not because Jesus’ mission failed, but that it might achieve its goal by expanding into a new divinely-determined, universal phase. The appropriate response is not mourning over the lost presence of the Lord, but joy in the face of all that has changed—in him, in his disciples and in the world at large (Lk 24:52). What was previously located in a particular province of the Roman Empire and in the city of Jerusalem and its Palestinian environs, after the ascension now implies a new universal accessibility—“neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21).

The experience of Christ’s ascension is destabilising. The “men of Galilee” needed to be told that there was no point in gazing into the heavens in the forlorn hope of catching a glimpse of a disappearing Jesus (Ac 1:11). They should be looking forward and outward into what God was bringing about. In the unavoidable language of metaphor, Jesus has been “taken up”; yet he is not *up there*, nor *down here below*, nor anywhere else, other than in the “wherever” of God’s everywhere. He is, therefore, “with God”, “at the right hand of the Father”, in that transcendent realm, the heaven of God’s presence, power and saving love for the world (Jn 3:16). The cloud that receives him out of sight is not a symbol of a celestial nowhere, let alone of a transcendently distant God. In this respect, faith is not a matter of ever looking up to what is above in a vain quest to locate Christ within the mundane dimensions of this world. It is more the act of looking forward and outward into the cosmic and universal dimensions of the mystery of Christ. It invites faith to apprehend the whole of creation, and to hope for the fullness and consummation of God’s self-communication—“God all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

This Jesus who lived and died and rose from the tomb will return to bring history to its salvific completion. In effect, his ascension disorients hitherto settled dimensions of space, time and even body. The vision of faith is not intent on fitting Christ into the physical world as it was or is now known, but, in terms of the Captivity Epistles and the Gospel of John, of locating the whole world, spiritual and material, “in” Christ—in whom all things hold together (Col 1:15-17). It enables faith to contemplate Christ, not in his human form within the created world, but as the one in whom all creation finds its coherence, destiny and fulfilment (Col 1:15-20; Eph4:10). Christ is risen, but not so as to be a visible object within the world. It is more a matter of the world and its history being taken up with Christ and integrated into him.

The phenomenon of the ascension is framed by references to the gift of the Spirit. The promise of the Spirit is inscribed into the mission of Jesus before his death and resurrection. And then, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is a decisive event in the life

of the Church after the resurrection. But even with the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit, history is still inconclusive: the community of faith looks to a final resolution in the return of Jesus himself in glory. And yet this “other paraclete”, the Spirit who is the gift of the Father sent in the name of Jesus, witnesses to him, and progressively brings to the consciousness of faith the full extent of what has been revealed (Jn 16:13-14). The Spirit, therefore, inspires and expands the Church’s realisation of the mystery of Christ, as the long history of the generations of faith unfolds. History is also a time of waiting until he comes again from within the “heavenly cloud” that enfolded him at his departure. The cloud is a symbolic depiction of the divine glory into which Jesus has been received. In that heavenly atmosphere, everything he is, was, and will be exists in a new dimension of universal significance and inclusion, to make him present in the “here-an-now” of faith in every age and place.

But the vertical dimension and universal expansion of the presence of the ascended Jesus to the world does not mean that the Incarnation has ceased. The rupture of the ascension does not change the identity of Jesus, let alone replace his historical identity with a mythic projection. The ascended Jesus is not rendered disincarnate or disembodied, even though the manner of the incarnation is expanded and the mode of his earthly embodiment transformed. The risen and ascended Jesus still possesses a bodily mode of being. There is no “excarnation”, but rather the reach and range of the incarnation grows with the formation of the Church as the Body of Christ as history unfolds after the ascension. Who he was on earth, he is now in heaven and ever will be: “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hb 13:8).

Faith’s experience of the ascended Christ contains is a new sensibility to what bodily existence might mean. Though Jesus is absent in terms of his previous bodily existence, he is increasingly present in an intimate, vital, and corporeal way, as the present and expanding reality in the Body of Christ is celebrated in the Eucharist. The phenomenon of this Body of Christ is not reducible to the objectivity of an individual biological body, as though the crucified Jesus is resuscitated rather than risen. But what is implied is a new vital field of interactive communication between Christ, the Head of the Body, and the faithful as his members. Though the ascension is a meta-empirical event, it does not imply for the ascended Jesus a meta-somatic or dis-incarnate state. Certainly, at such a point, special metaphysical questions for theology arise which cannot be pursued here. Suffice it to repeat that the ascension does not result simply in a blank rupture in disciples’ experience of Christ. Rather, it opens the way to appreciating the crucified and risen One in a new dimension of fulfilment and saving presence.

4. CONCLUSION

The ascension is not simply the experience of Jesus’ disappearance. In this respect, it is neither a deliberate concealment on his part, nor of careless loss on the part of the faithful. Faith knows where he has gone and why; and there is no question of such faith losing contact with him in his present world-transcending state. As has been repeatedly emphasised: his accessibility is magnified to universal proportions. Faith “sees” him ascending to a properly divine realm from which he will act and from which he will return.

The ascension of Jesus is to be interpreted neither in the simple terms of disappearance or absence. In an obvious sense, he is absent where before he was present. Jesus is no longer accessible as a human being on this planet. Nor does he remain as the risen One episodically disclosing himself to chosen witnesses in the period following his resurrection. However, these previous modes of presence yield to a new kind of presence in the wake of the ascension. To articulate this new kind of presence in some way would demand a re-thinking of the continuing incarnation in all its dimensions. That would require taking into account, for instance, the gift of the Spirit, the Eucharistic “real presence”, the scripture as the inspired Word of God, and the Church as the Body of Christ, and even the cosmic concentration of all creation in him.

There is, indeed, a paradox in realising that this new universal mode of presence occurs in, and is occasioned by, his absence in terms of all previous experience of him. The paradoxical character of Christ’s presence is evident in the New Testament itself and the sacramental liturgy. The presence of Christ is expressed, not as a projection of a de-individualised or universalised figure, but in the concreteness of his identity as the crucified and risen One—he who preached the good news of the Kingdom of God and performed works of healing and forgiveness in the particular events of his earthly ministry. The ascension does not mean the celestial dissolution of Jesus of Nazareth, but his glorification as the crucified and risen One. He is not dissolved in the glory of the Father but, by the action of God, affirmed and glorified in the all-encompassing significance of his identity and mission. It is this Jesus who is ascended and glorified, who is now universally accessible, whose person, words and deeds, all that he did and suffered, is rendered contemporary to the faithful of every age and place. Such a sensibility pervades the Gospels, and is continually nourished and refreshed in the Eucharistic liturgy. In short, the identity of the ascended Christ does not mean that he is less Jesus. Indeed, everything that determined the character and life of Jesus is sealed into his identity as the Christ—and made available to the contemplative faith of the Church. There is never any suggestion that Christ is so universalised that Jesus of Nazareth has become depersonalised, or even de-individualised. Although the ascension expands the dimensions of the incarnation to universal proportions, it is always Christ Jesus who is to return as the key and consummation of history.

The complexity of the biblical and historical data concerning the Christian experience of what was seen, is seen and what is not to be seen, what appears and what has been concealed, and what is present and absent awaiting final disclosure, provokes a more thoroughgoing attention to the revealed phenomenon of the ascension. It rules out any consideration of the ascension as a nice construction imposed on the experience of Jesus’ absence. Certainly, reducing the ascension to a projection on the part of the disciples does not cohere with Christian realism. Nonetheless, there is a subjective element in the “lifting up of hearts” and in an eruption of hope. The phenomenon of Jesus crucified, the risen and ascended Christ, saturates the whole of the New Testament and Christian life. It works to transform our whole sense of reality, along with the notions of time, space, presence, body, nature and universe which so structure human experience. With Christ ascended to the Father, history is newly begun.³³

³³ Aquinas’ exposition of the ascensions moves over the fertile middle-ground stretching between biblical figurative language and systematic theological analysis. Note, for instance, how he does not exclude change and movement in Christ because he continues to possess a created human nature (STh III, q. 57, a1, ad 1), and

Author: *Anthony Kelly is Professor of Theology in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, and Deputy Director of the University's Institute for Catholic Identity and Mission; a member of the Vatican's International Theological Commission since 2004, and in 2010 appointed an Inaugural Fellow of the Australian Catholic Theological Association (FACTA). He is author of numerous books including The Resurrection Effect: Transforming Christian Life and Thought (Orbis, 2008).*

Email: Anthony.Kelly@acu.edu.au

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further envisages that it was not appropriate for Christ to remain on earth since he is no longer subject, as are all earthly realities, to generation and corruption. In him, humanity has entered into a new mode of existence (see STh III, q. 57, a. 1).