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## THE FIRST SERMONS

ONLY incidental attention was paid to the Ascension by the writers that we have considered hitherto. As part of the rule of faith it could not be omitted; as an argument for or against the orthodox position it could not be entirely disregarded, but since it in no sense occupied the forefront of debate no attempt was made to expound it in detail.<sup>1</sup> But now a new factor began to operate which served in part to counteract this neglect. Consequent upon the changed relationship between Church and State, effected by the conversion of Constantine, a fresh emphasis was placed upon the Church's Calendar as a means of sanctifying human life in time.<sup>2</sup> The Calendar was conceived no longer eschatologically but historically, i.e. as consisting of a series of commemorations of past events. This inevitably directed attention to the separate incidents in the life of Our Lord, and, amongst these, to the Ascension.

Thus the observance of the feast of the Ascension<sup>3</sup> meant that henceforth, at least on that one day in the year, the homilist, having his theme provided for him, was certain to expound the subject of the Ascension. "Count forty days", prescribes the *Apostolic Constitutions*, a Syriac compilation dating from 375-400, "from the Lord's Day to the fifth day of the week, and celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, whereon He finished all His dispensation and constitution, and returned to that God and Father that sent Him, and sat down at the right hand of power, and remains there until His enemies are put under His feet."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hilary is the only possible exception.

<sup>2</sup> G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 1945, p. 333.

<sup>3</sup> It is customary to assert that Ascension Day was not observed until the latter part of the fourth century; the evidence seems to me to warrant a different conclusion, viz. that it was in existence from the first decades (see Appended Note I, "The Observance of Ascension Day", below p. 192).

<sup>4</sup> 5.19; cp. 5.7; 8.33.

1. *The Early Greek Homilists*

Whether or not to Chrysostom belongs the honour of having preached the earliest Ascension Day sermon to have survived cannot be determined,<sup>1</sup> since while it is probable that it belongs to the year 392, the date of a sermon by Gregory of Nyssa, also delivered on an Ascension Day, is not certain, although it would seem to belong to the closing years of his life as it has no hint of the controversies in which he had been previously engaged.

Gregory, one of the great Cappadocian trio,<sup>2</sup> had an acute and speculative mind which does not reveal itself at its best in this homily.<sup>3</sup> There is too much of the rhetorician, a profession adopted by Gregory before he entered the ministry, and too little of the theologian; too much concern for the elegantly turned phrase and too little for sober doctrinal exposition. Its theme is the contribution made by the Psalms to our understanding of the Ascension, but Gregory contents himself with quoting psalms 24 and 68, adding no more than the traditional exegesis, to the effect that the former refers to the celestial powers as they welcome the triumphant King of glory and the latter to captive human nature liberated from the thralldom of sin. Indeed, Gregory has more of value to say incidentally of the Ascension elsewhere in his works. So he is concerned to maintain that the exaltation refers to the manhood,<sup>4</sup> and, in Origenist vein, that no motion in space can be predicated of the Deity.<sup>5</sup> In the second book of his *Contra Eunomium* (c. 383), he cites Jesus' logion to Mary at the tomb<sup>6</sup> and comments:

In these words He sums up the whole aim of His dispensation as man. For men revolted from God and "served them which by nature were no gods"<sup>7</sup> and though being the children of God became attached to an evil father, falsely so-called. For this cause the Mediator between God and man, having assumed the

<sup>1</sup> J. Sirmond (*Opera Varia*, I.1728, cols. 39-56) prints a Latin version of a sermon which he ascribes to Eusebius of Caesarea and entitles *De Resurrectione et De Ascensione*. The author is not Eusebius of Caesarea—though possibly Eusebius of Emesa—and the work has nothing to do with the Ascension, being more correctly styled *De Resurrectione* when reprinted by Migne (*P.G.* 24.1093-1114).

<sup>2</sup> Neither Basil of Caesarea, Gregory's brother, nor Gregory of Nazianzus, has much to tell us of the Ascension; cp. Greg. Naz., *Carmina*, 1.11.220-1.

<sup>3</sup> *P.G.* 46.689-93. <sup>4</sup> *c. Eunom.*, 6.4. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.1. <sup>6</sup> John 20: 17. <sup>7</sup> Gal. 4: 8.

firstfruits of all human nature, sends to His brethren the announcement of Himself not in His divine character, but in that which He shares with us, saying: "I am departing in order to make by my own self that true Father, from whom you were separated, to be your Father, and by my own self to make that true God from whom you had revolted to be your God; for by that firstfruits which I have assumed, I am in myself presenting all humanity to its God and Father." Since then the firstfruits made the true God to be its God and the good Father to be its Father, the blessing is secured for human nature as a whole, and by means of the firstfruits the true God and Father becomes Father and God of all men. Now "if the firstfruits be holy, the lump also is holy".<sup>1</sup> But where the firstfruits, Christ, is (and the firstfruits is none other than Christ), there also are they that are Christ's, as the apostle says.<sup>2</sup>

This same image of the firstfruits<sup>3</sup> also finds a place in Chrysostom's sermon, which certainly surpasses that of Gregory; indeed, the large number of spurious Ascension addresses attributed to Chrysostom testifies to his pre-eminence as a preacher.

"His words", wrote Suidas in his *Lexicon*, concerning "John of Antioch surnamed the Golden Mouth", "resounded more loudly than the cataracts of the Nile. Since the world began, no one else has ever possessed such gifts as an orator." In the sermon on the Ascension we find several of those characteristics which earned John so great a reputation. There is his use of lively imagery rather than of theoretical argument: there is his easy and diffuse manner which does not overtax the listener: there is his sober and thorough exegesis, eschewing the excessive allegorism of the Alexandrian school for the more literal approach of the Antiochene.

Chrysostom begins<sup>4</sup> with a graceful allusion to the martyrs, an exordium prompted by the fact that he is preaching in the martyrdom of Romanesia, in the vicinity of Antioch. He then affirms that the present festival is notable because it marks the reconciliation of the human race with God. This fact provides grounds for wonder, since hitherto God and man had clearly been at enmity the One with the other.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 11: 16.

<sup>2</sup> *c. Eunom.*, 2,8.

<sup>3</sup> It was also used of the Ascension by Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 51.31).

<sup>4</sup> *P.G.* 50.441-52.

## HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

But we who appeared unworthy of earth have been led up to-day into the heavens: we who were not worthy of the pre-eminence below have ascended to the Kingdom above: we have scaled the heavens: we have attained the royal throne, and that nature, on whose account the Cherubim guarded paradise, to-day sits above the Cherubim. But how did this great marvel take place? How were we who had quarrelled, who had shown ourselves unworthy of earth and had fallen below from our origin—how were we taken up to such a height? How has the strife been brought to an end? How has the wrath been removed? How?

The answer, according to Chrysostom, lies in the Mediatorship of Christ through whom reconciliation has been effected.

And to-day is the foundation of these benefits, for as He assumed the firstfruits of our nature, so He took them up to the Lord.

The preacher then launches into one of those illustrations that he so delights to employ.

For as it happens in a field full of corn, when a man takes a few ears of corn and makes a small sheaf and offers it to God, he blesses the whole cornfield by means of this sheaf, so Christ has done this also, and through that one flesh and firstfruits has made our race to be blessed. But why did He not offer the whole of nature? Because that is not the firstfruits if He offers the whole, but if He offers a little, preparing the whole to be blessed by the smaller amount.

Chrysostom next refers to Lev. 19: 23, 24, which enacts that the fruit of a new tree is not to be taken until the fourth year, consequently it is not just the *first* fruits but the first *good* fruits that are to be offered to God. So our human nature “was not offered, even if it was the first, but that was freed from sin (in Christ) and was therefore offered up, for this is the firstfruits.”

And these things refer to our flesh which He offered. So He offered the firstfruits of our nature to the Father and so the Father admired the gift, and on account of the worth of the offerer and the blamelessness of that which was offered, He received it with His own hands and placed the gift next to Him, and said: “Sit thou on my right hand.” To which nature did

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God say: "Sit thou on my right hand"? To that which heard: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."<sup>1</sup>

So, Chrysostom informs us, the angels rejoiced, for if there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, how much more joy is there when "the universal nature was brought into heaven through the firstfruits". The angels indeed rejoiced at the Incarnation: they showed themselves again at the Resurrection and for a third time at the Ascension. Their presence on this last occasion, according to Chrysostom, who here rests heavily on the Acts' account, was necessary for two reasons: first, to soothe the disciples' sorrow at the departure of their Lord by declaring His return, and, second, to assure them that this Ascension was indeed into heaven itself.

Elijah was taken up "as if" into heaven, for he was a servant; but Jesus into heaven, for He was Lord. The one in a fiery chariot, the other in a cloud. For when it was necessary for the servant to be called, a chariot was sent, but when the Son, a royal throne, and not simply a royal throne, but the Father's. For concerning the Father Isaiah says: "Behold, the Lord sitteth upon a light cloud."<sup>2</sup> Since the Father sits upon a cloud, He sends the cloud for the Son. And when Elijah ascended, he left his cloak to Elisha; but when Jesus ascended, He left spiritual gifts to His disciples, not making one prophet but a myriad of Elishas, much greater and more illustrious than he.

The sermon concludes with a fine and sustained exhortation to practise righteousness that at the Second Coming we might be found worthy to be taken up by the Lord.

In the second of his Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>3</sup> delivered in 400 or 401, when he had left Antioch and become bishop of Constantinople, Chrysostom repeated many of the same points that he had made in this sermon some eight years before, viz. the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ, which we have already observed in Cyril of Jerusalem: the royal dignity implied by the appearance of the cloud, and the reasons for the angels' presence. His exposition of this last point includes a new and interesting distinction drawn between the Resurrection and the Ascension.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 3: 19.

<sup>2</sup> Isa. 19: 1.

<sup>3</sup> P.G. 60.28-30.

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In the Resurrection they saw the end but not the beginning, and in the Ascension they saw the beginning but not the end. Because in the former it had been superfluous to have seen the beginning, the Lord Himself who spake these things being present and the sepulchre showing clearly that He was not there; but in the latter they needed to be informed of the sequel by the words of others.

Also worthy of note is Chrysostom's further distinction between Ascension and assumption, of which Athanasius had in part laid the foundation.

Moreover the angels did not say: "whom ye have seen taken up", but "going into heaven". Ascension is the word, not assumption. The expression "taken up" belongs to the flesh. . . . Of the expressions, some are adapted to the conception of the disciples, some agreeable with the divine majesty.

In his *Expositio in psalmum xlvii*<sup>1</sup> Chrysostom draws the same distinction:

"God ascended with a shout." It does not say "He was taken up" but "He ascended", showing that He ascended without being led by anyone else, but He Himself travelled along this way. For Elijah did not go like Christ but was led by another power, because human nature could not traverse a strange road. But the Only-begotten ascended by His own power.<sup>2</sup>

A like interest in terminology is revealed in a second sermon on the Ascension,<sup>3</sup> assigned to Chrysostom but more correctly to be described as "of doubtful origin",<sup>4</sup> although in breadth of treatment it is not entirely unworthy of its attribution.

While they were watching He was taken up: He was parted from them and was borne up into heaven and a cloud received Him up: and as they were looking into heaven He went. He was received up: He was taken up: He was borne up: He entered: for Jesus did not enter into a holy place made with hands, but into heaven itself, now to appear before God.<sup>5</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> P.G. 55.213-14.

<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom interprets the "shout" as a reference to Christ's triumph, in so far as He overcame sin and death, and affirms that He carried up the trophy (*τρόπαιον*), viz. our human nature.

<sup>3</sup> P.G. 52.773-92.

<sup>4</sup> O. Bardenhewer, *Patrology*, 1908, p. 332.

<sup>5</sup> Heb. 9: 24.

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not only entered but passed through: "For", says Paul, "we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens", Jesus.<sup>1</sup> He went up: He ascended: He was taken up: He went: He passed through. Take note. He ascended as having authority in order that the saying of the prophet might be fulfilled: "God ascended with a shout."<sup>2</sup>

But the most interesting idea developed by this homilist lies in the parallelism he draws between the earnest of the Spirit who descended from heaven and the earnest of human nature that was taken up into heaven; both are pledges of salvation.<sup>3</sup> "Above His body, below His Spirit for us." He then proceeds to argue that as a man and his wife are united and so become one kin (*γένος*), so

when the flesh of Christ was taken up, through that flesh the whole Church became of the same kin as Christ; Paul was Christ's kinsman, Peter, every believer, all of us, every godly person. Wherefore Paul says this: "Being therefore the kin of God".<sup>4</sup> . . . Paul thus affirms the existence of a kinship. And again elsewhere: "We are a body of Christ and severally limbs of his flesh."<sup>5</sup> On account of the flesh which He took up, we are His kinsmen; we therefore have this pledge above, i.e. the body, which He took from us, and below the Holy Spirit with us. And behold the wonder! I do not say that the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and is no longer in heaven, and that having changed places the body is in heaven and the Spirit on earth, but that the Spirit is with us and everywhere and above. "For whither", it is said, "shall I go from Thy Spirit?"<sup>6</sup> And why dost thou wonder if the Spirit is with us and above, and the body of Christ is above and with us? Heaven has the holy body and earth received the Holy Spirit: Christ came and brought the Holy Spirit; He went up and took our body. . . . We have therefore the pledge of our life in heaven; we have been taken up with Christ.

The sermon ends, as does Chrysostom's own, by directing attention to the Second Advent and with an exhortation to righteousness that we might be found worthy at His coming.

<sup>1</sup> Heb. 4: 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 47: 5.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian was the first to formulate this theme, *De Res.*, 51, cited above, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 17: 29.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 12: 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ps. 139: 7.