

A HOMILY ON THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST¹

INTRODUCTION

Gregory of Nyssa's brief homily on the Ascension is perhaps the most ancient witness of this feast's existence², and he does not hesitate to call it the "great celebration" (*megalen heorten*, J.323.18). On the other hand, there is little or no direct allusion to Christ's ascension into heaven; the homily turns out to be more a commentary on Psalms Twenty-two and Twenty-three. Because of this it is not difficult to see that Gregory's sermon was most likely composed about the same time as his **Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms**³. This work which sees a progression in the spiritual life from the first to the last psalm does not contain reference to Psalms Twenty-two and Twenty-three. As Jean Bernardi says with regard to the homily on Christ's ascension into heaven, "La leçon qu'il tire en effet du Psaume xxii est une leçon de confiance devant le baptême"⁴. Gregory therefore remarks that the person about to be baptized must become a sheep "that you may be buried with him through baptism in death...This is not death itself but its shadow and symbol" (J.324.7-10).

Reference to "that sober inebriation," *nephousan ekeinen methen*, later on in the same page (J.324.20) is a result of the Holy Spirit's anointing and offering of wine (cf. J.324.16 & 17) which is opposite to that inebriation caused by wine. This is a favorite theme of Gregory which he related to ecstasy and is fully developed in his **Commentary on the Song of Songs**⁵:

I know that blessed Peter participated in this kind of inebriation⁶ while being while being hungry and drunk at the same time...Peter experienced that divine, sober inebriation. By it he went out of himself and saw the "linen sheet" of the Gospel "let down by its four corners."

¹ The literal reading of the title is "Gregory, bishop of Nyssa. Concerning that festive day which is said to be consecrated in the region of the Cappadocians: the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ."

² "Il est en effet le premier témoignage certain d'une fête de l'Ascension distincte de celle de la Pentecôte. Il est possible que ce déplacement de l'Ascension au 40^e jour après Pâques soit lié au fait que l'on ait voulu consacrer plus spécialement la fête du 50^e jour au dogme de la divinité de l'Esprit." Jean Danielou, *La Chronologie des Sermons de Grégoire de Nysse* in **Revue des Sciences Religieuses** #29 (Paris, 1955), p.370.

³ Published by Hellenic College Press, Brookline, MA 02146, 1994.

⁴ **La Predication des Peres Cappadociens** (Paris, 1968), p.288.

⁵ Hellenic College Press, 1987, pp.193-4.

⁶ Referring to several lines above: "Thus Paul, the new Benjamin, was inebriated and said in ecstasy, 'whether we are transported in mind, it is to God (Here ecstasy is a movement towards God) or whether we be sober, it is for you'" [2Cor 5.13].

Another theme briefly mentioned in the ascension homily is that of *anakephalaiosis* or "recapitulation" of all things in Jesus Christ (J.327.1) which is related to the controversial yet better known concept of *apokatastasis*⁷, "restoration," (Here with regard to creation's "pristine state," J.327.3). It bears affiliation with *hupotage* ("subjection") as developed in a treatise on 1Cor 15.28⁸:

When we are removed from evil in imitation of the first fruits [Christ], our entire nature is mixed with this selfsame fruit. One body has been formed with the good as predominant; our body's entire nature is united to the divine, pure nature. This is what we mean by the Son's subjection: when in his body Christ rightly has the subjection brought to him, and he effects in us the grace of subjection.

With the theme of Christ's ascension in mind and despite the fact that it is scarcely mentioned, Gregory brings his readers' attention at the end of his homily to this mystery which allows us "to obtain citizenship (*politeia*) with God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (J.327.10-11). He earlier refers to such *politeia* which is "in accord with virtue" (J.325.10) and which allows us to *ascend* "that mountain of his royal dwelling" (J.325.9). Here the practice of virtue, ascent and restoration all combine in order to describe that citizenship won by the passion death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

The critical text was edited by Ernest Gebhardt and may be found in **Gregorii Nysseni Opera**, vol. ix (Leiden, 1967), pp.323-7. The edition by J.P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graeca**, (Paris, 1858), volume 46, cols. 689-93.

THE TEXT

[**M.689 & J.323**] How agreeable a companion is the prophet David in all life's ways! Not only has he wonderfully joined to it every spiritual stage of life but has included every type of advancement! He has played with those who infants according to

⁷⁷ Origen was the first to develop this theme. He maintained that creation returns to its pristine state as a result of *koros*, satiety, when even the devil himself would be reconciled with God. For information, refer to **L'Image de Dieu chez Saint Gregoire de Nysse** by Roger Leys (Paris, 1951), pp.88-92.

⁸⁸ **The Greek Orthodox Theological Review**, vol. 28, #1 (Brookline, Ma, 1983), p.19. Compare a passage from Gregory's **Commentary on Ecclesiastes**: "The soul existed right from the beginning; it had been purified in the past and will appear in the future. God, who fashioned the human body, will show the resurrection at the proper time, for that which comes after the resurrection was indeed fashioned first. The resurrection is nothing other than the restoration (*apokatastasis*) of all things to their original state." (J.296).

God, struggled with men, instructed youths, supported those in old age and performed every type of service for all sorts of people. He was a weapon for those engaged in combat, an instructor for athletes, offered a wrestling school for persons occupied with contests, was a crown of victory, supplied joy for those at table and consolation for persons in grief. Everything according to human life was included to partake of this grace. What power of prayer had David dispensed? What cheer at feasts did the prophet not adorn? We must now see that the prophet enhances our great celebration in yet another way while he [M.692] has provided us in an appropriate manner with joy by referring to the psalms [cf. Ps 22]. Through one sheep he bids that God nourish you, to lack no good thing, to reside in green grass, to have the water of rest, nourishment, shelter, [J.324] a path, road and the good Shepherd who generously takes care of all your needs [cf. Jn 10.11].

In every circumstance he instructs the Church because you must first be a sheep belonging to the good Shepherd through instruction in the good to keep the divine laws of doctrine and be led to the fountain. In this way you may be buried with him [cf. Rom 6.3-4] through baptism in death and not fear such death. This is not death itself but its shadow and symbol. "If I walk in the midst of the shadow of death I will not fear evil because you are with me" [Ps 22.4]. Then the Spirit consoles with a rod (for the Spirit is the comforter) and sets a mystic table before the demons who afflict men through idolatry. The table of the Spirit is inimical to theirs. The Spirit next anoints the head with oil and offers wine to gladden the heart [cf. Ps 103.15] with that sober inebriation for the soul, situating our thoughts in eternity instead of temporal concerns. A taste of inebriation brings an abrupt halt to life's incompleteness through sudden death and extends our residence in God's house to the length of days.

Such a greater, more perfect joy has been bestowed upon us in one of the psalms which rouses the soul [cf. Ps 23]. If possible, we will briefly explain its meaning to you. "The earth and its [J.325] fullness belong to the Lord" [vs. 1]. Oh man, what can be new if our God has been seen on earth and lived with men? Because the earth is his creation and he made it, it is not unusual nor unbecoming to see the Lord come to what is his own [cf. Jn 1.11]. He was not in a strange world but in the earth which he had established upon the foundation of the seas and fixed a good passage for the rivers. What was the reason for his presence? Having cast the ruin of sin away from you, he ascended the mountain of his royal dwelling in his chariot and then opened up a way of citizenship for you in accord with virtue. You cannot ascend that mountain unless you are innocent in the company of virtues and are washed from every evil deed, pure in heart without vanity in your soul nor inflict your neighbor with grief. The blessing of this ascent is a prize, and the Lord bestows his mercy which he had stored up. "This is the generation seeking him" through virtue ascending on high and "seeks the face of the God of Jacob" [Ps 23.6].

Perhaps the rest of this psalm is loftier than the Gospel teaching. The Lord's Gospel offers a way of living upon the earth and tells of that return which the noble **[M.693]** prophet sets out upon. Corporeal burdens do not oppress him, and has joined himself to the transcendent powers whose voices proclaim to us that the Lord has advanced to his throne surrounded by the angels. While present upon earth they adjured men to enter when saying **[J.326]** "Lift up your ancient gates and be lifted up, ancient doors that the king of glory may enter" [Ps 23.7]. Because he is present wherever he happens to be and contains everything in himself, he makes it deserving by receiving it (For not only was he a man among men but had united his own nature with that of the angels). Therefore the watchmen ask while greeting him, "Who is the king of glory" [Ps 23.8]? They demonstrate their strength and power in warfare because he was about to engage him who had taken human nature prisoner and was about to loosen death's bonds; by having destroyed the last enemy [cf. 1Cor 15.26], he might restore mankind to freedom and peace.

Similar voices say (The mystery of death had already been fulfilled, victory was achieved against the foe, the cross is raised as a trophy and "he who has made captivity captive has ascended on high" [Ps 67.19] who has given life, kingdom and these good gifts to men) that once again the transcendent gates are opened for him. Our guards exchange the escort and ask that the transcendent gates open for him in order that he might be again glorified. But he who has girded himself with our life's dirty robe is not recognized because his garments were red from the wine vat of human evils [cf. Is 63.2]. Therefore we have the voice of those attending him repeat "Who is this the king of glory" [Ps 23.10]? No longer do we have the following response, "He who is strong and mighty in battle," but "the Lord **[J.327]** of hosts who has obtained rule over all, has recapitulated everything in himself, holds primacy in everything [cf. Col 1.18] and restores creation to its pristine state: "he is the king of glory." See how great is the feast which David has instituted since he united his own grace to the joy of the Church. Let us imitate the prophet as far as possible in love of God, meekness of life and in tolerance towards our enemies. In this way the prophet's teaching might guide us to obtain citizenship with God in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.