The Mountain of Our Ascent

June 16th, 2019

Trinity Sunday

In one week, I attended a graduation and a funeral. Both were, in a sense, mountain top experiences. The first ceremony was held on a literal mountain, and the second celebrated the life of someone who has now ascended to the mountain of the Lord. They were both graduations. The word graduation comes from the Latin root *gradus,* a step. In our gospel reading today, Jesus says: “‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:12-13). Here Jesus speaks of things to come, of steps to be taken, of a road to be traveled. The Spirit of truth is coming to guide the apostles on this path. Though Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, though the apostles have already been chosen, though the work of salvation will be accomplished in the next three days, there is always more in the infinite God to discover—and Jesus promises them this endless path and a Comforter to guide them on the path. The kingdom of heaven thus comes to us as a paradox. In the kingdom we are both *graduands* and *graduates*, those who are about to complete their passage and those who have completed it. The cross has accomplished our salvation and freedom; the life of ascending, however, continues as we mount the steps of spiritual growth and ever-deepening experiences of the holiness of God. On Wednesday, at the graduation ceremony, Andrew Petter, President and Vice-Chancellor of Simon Fraser University, former MLA and Attorney General of British Columbia and renowned legal scholar, spoke of a new book by David Brooks titled *The Second Mountain: The Quest for the Moral Life.* As a review in *The Guardian* states: “It’s bad enough if you’ve failed to achieve your career ambitions, win the respect of your peers or fashion a comfortable lifestyle. But in some ways it’s worse if you’ve succeeded, because then it’s all too obvious that such things don’t bring deep fulfilment. In David Brooks’s governing metaphor, you’ve made it to the summit of life’s ‘first mountain’, only to discover that the view isn’t really so great and you feel empty inside. The truly joyful people are those, often impelled by a shock such as divorce or bereavement, who find their second mountain, abandoning themselves to a greater cause, forgoing the life they’d wanted for whatever the world needs from them”; “The book builds its case through stories of people who took the key step toward the second mountain, which is commitment – to a spouse, community, faith or philosophy. ‘The world tells them to be a good consumer, but they want to be the one consumed – by a moral cause,’ Brooks writes. ‘The world tells them to want independence, but they want interdependence.’” (Oliver Burkeman, “The Second Mountain by David Brooks Review—a self-help guide to escaping the self”, *The Guardian,* May 14th, 2019. *Guardian.com*).

Life in the Holy Spirit promises and encourages exactly this ascent of the second mountain, although in our faith both mountains might be considered as one, the passes and summits of the first being subordinated to and building toward the ultimate peak of the second. As I have said before, there are great instances of mountain imagery in Scripture. The Ark of Noah rested safely on the mountains of Ararat (Genesis 8:4). The Law was given on Mount Horeb (Exodus 20). The temple stood on the Mountain of Zion (Isaiah 60:14). The Lord Jesus was transfigured on a high mountain—possibly Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon (Matthew 17:1-9). On the Mount of Olives, Jesus pronounced some of his final discourses (Matthew 24-25), and on the little mountain of Golgotha, Jesus was crucified (Matthew 26, Luke 23, Mark 15). When Jesus reveals the Holy Spirit, and thereby the beautiful relationship of the Trinity, he is also inviting us to ascend higher and deeper into wisdom, knowledge, faith, hope and love. The revelation of the Trinity in the Gospels and the writings of the apostles reflects that only God is good (Mark 10:18); that God is love (1 John 4:8); that Father, Son and Holy Spirit love each other and abide in each other (John 3:35, John 14:15-27), possess and reveal perfect wisdom (1 Corinthians 2), and pour their love into our hearts (Romans 5:5). The more we aspire to know God in His fullness, the more we will discover that the ascent requires more than just thinking or feeling—it requires praying, learning, serving, relating and loving. And all of these require commitment.

Once, I was in the mountains near Ashibetsu in Hokkaido, and my companions and I were going to visit a historic site at the top. There were steps made of stone to lead us upward. After about 100 of these steps, I lost count. My legs ached and I felt fairly sick, but eventually, I got there. I do not remember anything about what we saw at the top. I remember the climb, though. Another time, I went with some teachers and school friends on a climb of Mount Eniwa. The path wound through beautiful forests of birch and maple. Sometimes we followed dried-up streams to make the ascent easier. Then a rainstorm blew in, and these paths turned into torrents. Everything was slippery; we would grasp for birch branches or roots just to stay on the mountain. In the end, we had to abandon our ascent. It rained and rained all the way down. All of us were chilled to the bone. Some months later, we returned to the mountain, and climbed it again, all the way to the top. I have always been grateful that we were able to do that, that a teacher enabled us to learn the lesson of commitment. The view from Mount Eniwa is very beautiful—you can see Lake Shikotsu and its surrounding volcanic mountains and their woodlands. Our second descent was really the beginning of a new ascent. That is the ascent of commitment. The apostle Paul says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9); “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). When dedicating the temple, King Solomon said: “And may your hearts be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands” (1 Kings 8:61).

There is another aspect of ascending. Commitment begins with desire. One has to desire the summit in order to climb, and this should not be surprising because love is the wellspring of all virtues. The Songs of Ascent are Psalms 120-134, and they were probably written to be sung by pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem to worship at the temple in antiquity. They are also called *Gradual Songs—*again from the Latin word *gradus—*songs of the steps. Many of these songs are filled with joyful longing and a desire for holy things. They contain brilliant reminders of where our hearts should be. In Psalm 121, the pilgrims affirm the guidance of the LORD along their path: “The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth forevermore” (Psalm 121:7-8). In Psalm 122, we hear the love and desire for peace amongst the fellow pilgrims: “For my brothers and companions’ sake, I will say ‘Peace be within you!’ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good” (Psalm 122:8-9). I love that line—*I will seek your good.* That is real love—to seek the good of another. It’s also a word of encouragement, a salutation almost. It reminds me of the title of one of Rob Des Cotes’ contemplative books, *Ultreia.* The title comes from an old expression on the Camino de Santiago: “Ultreia!” derived from Latin and meaning “Beyond!” It translates to something like “Onwards!” The salutation is attested as early as the 12th Century *Codex Calixtinus,* possibly the earliest travel guide for pilgrims on the Camino. *Ultreia!* There is always something beyond, something higher for us to seek. That is our hope. Psalm 123 expresses the awe, the deep respect, the upward gaze and the patient waiting of a servant pilgrims: “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God” (Psalm 123:1-2). Gratitude, praise and blessing fuel the desire of those climbing to the heights: “The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad” (Psalm 126:3). Perhaps my favourite line is in Psalm 125, where the very ascent makes the pilgrim as strong as the mountain and its citadel: “Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever” (Psalm 125:1). The more we desire the gifts of the Spirit, the more the Spirit gives, the more we become like the Holy Spirit, that is to say, spiritual. As the apostle Paul says, “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 14:1); James says: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). And in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul says: “Always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 5:15). To climb mountains, we need a desire to strive, to persist, to climb; the more we desire, the more the commitment will grow, and from commitment, the gifts at the summit of the mountain.

In sending the Holy Spirit, Jesus is promising us an ascent to the heights he ascended: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-15). All has been given to you through Jesus—the very life, wisdom and communion of God—the virtues and rewards of the second mountain—the good life of holy desire, commitment, and sharing, of being with Jesus—they are ours through the love and grace of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some weeks ago, I showed the children pictures of snails, and I shared two quotes with them. They are good quotes, and I close with them today. The first is from the poet Kobayashi Issa: “O snail, ascend Mount Fuji, but slowly, slowly!” And the second is from St. John Climacus: “Ascend, brothers and sisters, ascend eagerly the mountain of the Lord!”

A Blessing from the Camino de Santiago

Lord Jesus Christ, you taught us through the Apostle St Paul that here below we have no lasting city and must always seek the heavenly city. Hear our prayers for these pilgrims we commission. May the Holy Spirit breathe his grace into their hearts; may he enliven their faith, strengthen their hope and feed the flame of their love. May they thus make their pilgrimage in the true spirit of penance, sacrifice and expiation. May the same spirit purify their minds from every evil thought. May he defend their hearts and give them the constant help of his protection so that they can reach the objective of their journey safely and by means of this pilgrimage they are now starting merit to come one day to the heavenly Jerusalem…You who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.