

Easter 7C Sermon  
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At the Feast of the Ascension, which we celebrated this last Thursday with Choral Evensong and Eucharist, there is an old Anglo-Catholic liturgical practice of extinguishing the Christ Candle after the Gospel is read, signifying Christ's physical departure from our midst after his 40-day post-resurrection sojourn.

This ritual extinguishing initiates an unusual period in the church year – a period of 9 days between Ascension and Pentecost, which is next Sunday, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. In the church of yesteryear this period was called “Ascensiontide.” Not really a liturgical season all its own, it was nevertheless a significant way of identifying the brief period when humankind was bereft of Jesus's physical presence among them, but also before the manifesting of the Holy Spirit to the early disciples. It is a strange interlude, because, although it falls at the tail-end of the normally celebratory season of Eastertide, it is a time where we are, in effect, orphans, and the usual atmosphere of celebration seems, suddenly, just a tiny bit lacking in confidence. It is an interval of eerie silence between the event-filled period of Jesus's life on earth, and the full vesting of the church with the powerful presence of God's Spirit that comes next week at Pentecost.

So, as I reflected on this orphaned status this past week – heightened in its effect by Mother Elizabeth's extended absence due to her mother's precarious health – I was reminded of my own mother's death a year-and-a-half ago, leaving me as an orphan, so to speak. Though an adult, and therefore not qualifying for the connotations of desertion, dereliction, and neglect that go with the word “orphan,” I nevertheless recall feeling just a little bit abandoned. Though I'd been able to take care of myself (with my wife's help, of course) for thirty-some years, I had this odd feeling that there was no fall back, no back up, no one who was unquestionably responsible to rescue me if I fell on hard times.

I suspect many of us have felt this way upon the death of a parent, even though our manifest independence should have rendered such a feeling ridiculous. And perhaps this is what the disciples felt at Jesus' departure from them at the Ascension.

Those of you who know me, know that my spiritual journey has been fraught with many doubts. The son of a Baptist minister, my childhood Evangelical faith was rejected while in College; yet the young atheist in me found himself frustratingly but irresistibly drawn back to church, especially after discovering the Episcopal Church and a level of ritual, ceremonial, and mystery that somehow spoke to a part of me that went deeper than my intellect. But, even though I find myself wanting to believe, wanting to feel confidence that my spiritual yearnings are on a path towards embrace of belief in the Divine, I continue to question the basic assumptions that underlie such belief. It is, in many ways, a battle between my intellect -- which cannot find justification for religious belief -- and my emotions -- which continue to be profoundly moved when I participate in liturgical acts, and in the experiencing of profound beauty, particularly of music. I recall hearing the widow of Ralph Vaughan Williams -- one of my musical idols -- describe him as a "disappointed theist," and this statement perfectly describes the battle between intellect and emotion.

I believe a major step forward in my thinking along these lines occurred when I encountered the thought of 20th century American theologian Paul Tillich, particularly his description of the Divine as "the ground of our being." His contention was that, whatever is of "ultimate concern" to the individual, *that* is God. So, what is of "ultimate concern" to me? What is the very foundation, or ground, of my being? This is a very complicated question, but one with enough substance to it to occupy my thoughts for at least one lifetime.

But if I attempt to define what is of "ultimate concern" to me right now, I first have to ask what it means. "Concern" has to do with that which occupies the essence of who I am and what I see around me. "Ultimate" is what is permanent, or beyond myself, having to do with meaning and purpose. So "ultimate concern" is perhaps that which I would wish to most see my life embodying and reflecting, particularly when I look back at it from the point of death. So, with this in mind, here are a few of the things that I would describe as being of "ultimate concern" to me:

- the joy I feel in comprehending (and thus experiencing) transcendent beauty
- the sense I have that this beauty can be profoundly redemptive

- the joy I feel in creating beauty and, in so doing, bringing joy into others' lives
- the importance of being loved and appreciated as someone who feels the above

This is not everyone's description for what is of "ultimate concern," obviously. In fact, I must accept that there are potentially people to whom the above would appear as shallow and unimportant. But, according to Paul Tillich's thinking, this joy in creating and comprehending redemptive beauty is, to me, God. It is the irreducible part of my essence that defines who I am and what makes me tick.

And the reason that this was so transformational for me, was that it made my intellectual qualms with religion, in a sense, irrelevant. Not that I don't still think such thoughts and wrangle with such doubts. But by apprehending that part of me which is of ultimate concert as the Divine Spark, the ground of my being, the God-part, it allowed me to take the "dissatisfied" part out of being a "dissatisfied theist."

And this is comforting. So, as I ponder this strange period called Ascensiontide, this is for me -- at least *this year* -- the promise that Jesus made that I will not be left orphaned, that comfort would be provided. And in this moment, I accept that comfort. I accept it as from God. And that's about as confident a theistic statement that I can possibly make. At least today.