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PAINFUL GOODBYES AND THE ASCENSION

Among the deeper mysteries in life perhaps the one we struggle with the most is the mystery of the Ascension. It's not so much that we misunderstand it, we simply don't understand it.

What is the Ascension?

Historically it was an event within the life of Jesus and the early church and is now a feast-day for Christians, one that links Easter to Pentecost. But it is more than an historical event, it is at the same time a theology, a spirituality, and an insight into life that we need to understand to better sort out the paradoxical interplay between life and death, presence and absence, love and loss.

The Ascension names and highlights a paradox that lies deep at the centre of life, namely, that we all reach a point in life where we can only give our presence more deeply by going away so that others can receive the full blessing of our spirits.

What does that mean?

When Jesus was preparing to leave this earth he kept repeating the words: "It is better for you that I go away! You will be sad now, but your sadness will turn to joy. If I don't go away you will be unable to receive my spirit. Don't cling to me, I must ascend."

Why is it better sometimes that we go away?

Any parent with grown children has heard similar words from their children, unspoken perhaps but there nonetheless. When young people leave home to go to college or to begin life on their own, what they are really saying to their parents is: "Mum and dad, it is better that I go away. You will be sad now, but your sadness will turn to joy. If I don't go, I will always be your little boy or little girl but I will be unable to give you my life as an adult. So please don't cling to the child you once had or you will never be able to receive my adulthood. I need to go away now so that our love can come to full bloom."

The pain in this kind of letting go is often excruciating, as parents know, but to refuse to do that is to truncate life.

The same is true for the mystery of death. For example: I was 22 years old when in the space of four months both of my parents, still young, died. For my siblings and me the pain was searing. Initially we were nearly overwhelmed with a sense of being orphaned, abandoned, of losing a vital life-connection (that, ironically, we had mostly taken for granted until then). And our feelings were mainly cold, there's little that's warm in death.

But time is a great healer. After a while, and for me this took several years, the coldness disappeared and my parents' deaths were no longer a painful thing. I felt again their presence, and now as a warm, nurturing spirit that was with me all time. The coldness of death turned into a warmth. They had gone away but now they could give me their love and blessing in a way that they never could fully while they were alive. Their going away eventually created a deeper and purer presence.

The mystery of love and intimacy contains that paradox: To remain present to someone we love we have to sometimes be absent, in ways big and small. In the paradox of love, we can only fully bless each other when we go away. That is why most of us only "get" the blessing our loved ones were for us after they die. Mystically, "blood and water" (cleansing and the deep permission to live without guilt) flow from their dead bodies, just as these flowed from Jesus' dead body.

And this is even true, perhaps particularly so, in cases where our loved ones were difficult characters who struggled for peace or to bless anyone in this life. Death washes clean and releases the spirit and, even in the case of people who struggled to love, we can after their deaths receive their blessing in way we never could while they were alive. Like Jesus, they could only give us their real presence by going away.

"It is better for you that I go away!" These are painful words most of the time, from a young child leaving her mother for a day to go to school, to the man leaving his family for a week to go on a business trip, to the young man moving out of his family's house to begin life on his own, to a loved one saying goodbye in death. Separation hurts, goodbyes bring painful tears, and death of every kind wrenches the heart.

But that is part of the mystery of love. Eventually we all reach a point where what is best for everyone is that we go away so that we can give our spirit. The gift that our lives are can only be fully received after we ascend.