



ASCENSION

Scripture provides two accounts of the Ascension by the same author. St Luke informs us that he was not an eyewitness to the life of Christ, but that he had carefully interviewed eyewitnesses, and he collates their testimonies in a coherent narrative that grows in subtlety as, little by little, he comes to understand his sources better. The account I have cited (“as he blessed them he was carried up to heaven”) comes from his gospel (Luke 24:51). It is instructive to compare it with the later Lucan account in that gospel’s sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. The passage is read to us at Mass on Ascension Thursday. It recounts how, with the Apostles looking on, Jesus “was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). No longer is it suggested that the Lord shot into the firmament. No; “a cloud took him”.

A cloud is not just something to do with the weather. When Israel walked out of Egypt, “the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud” (Exodus 13:21). The cloud was a sign that God was in their midst. When Moses scaled Sinai to stand before God, the Lord descended in a cloud. It was likewise in a cloud that, later, he filled the tent of meeting with his presence. By the book of Numbers, the cloud has become an established symbol of God’s nearness. This connection is further developed in the historical books. What happens when the temple in Jerusalem is finished, the building work all done? What makes a mere monument into a sanctuary? At the moment of dedication, “a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God” (2 Chronicles 5:13-14). The cloud is glory. The glory is presence. It tells us that the Lord, the Father of all, is there.

By ERIK VARDEN (The Tablet – 25 May 2019)