Blinded by the light: Sunday, May 27

John 17:20-26

by Suzanne Guthrie in the May 16, 2001 issue

In Edwin A. Abbott's story *Flatland*, *A Romance of Many Dimensions*, the two-dimensional square narrator encounters a three-dimensional sphere that changes his perception of reality. While trying to find a scientific metaphor for religious experience in 1884, Abbott created a delightful story that is still a favorite among students of mathematics and physics, religion and social criticism.

Panicked, the square cries, "Either this is madness or it is hell." "It is neither," calmly replies the voice of the sphere, "it is knowledge; it is three Dimensions: open your eye once again and try to look steadily." After getting used to the reality into which he has been transported, the square beholds beauty until now only "inferred, conjectured, dreamed."

In the season of Ascension we are asked to behold a beauty that until now has been only inferred, conjectured, dreamed. We are asked to contemplate the vision of the Son at the right hand of the Father in glory and the Holy Spirit about to break forth upon us. At Ascensiontide, we encounter the Trinity through prayer. In two week's time, on Trinity Sunday, most of us will have to endure preaching about it. As difficult as an exposition of trinitarian doctrine may be, perhaps preaching is easier than praying.

Here the man or woman of prayer encounters the paradox of union: the perception of abandonment masking fulfillment. The great Christian mystics characterize this season of the soul as a most distressing threshold. The soul, while uniting with the Beloved, absorbs a light so deep and penetrating it is temporarily blinded—as if you'd come into the kitchen at 3 a.m. and turned on all the lights. Only time allows the soul to adjust to this infusion of light and love and beauty.

In his love poem "The Dark Night of the Soul," St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) perceives the blinding night itself as a guide. "O blessed night! O night more lovely

than the dawn! O night that has united the lover with His beloved, Transforming the beloved in her Lover."

But in the meantime, "Either this is madness or it is hell," as the flatlander observed before appropriating the reality of the three-dimensional realm. The vision of a wider experience of the divine is experienced at first as darkness or dread. The 13th-century anonymous author of *Mirror for Simple Souls* writes, " This night is nothing less than the Trinity itself, showing its inner being to the soul. The Trinity opens itself up to the soul and shows her its glory, known to itself alone." But, the writer adds, all previous consciousness of God disappears in the process: a most unpleasant sensation, since by this time along the Christian pilgrimage God is the soul's single desire.

This Sunday, the church gives us the magnificent "High Priestly Prayer" from the last discourse of Jesus in John's Gospel to contemplate as we wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. (A third of it, actually. The lectionary splits the prayer into three parts for the three-year cycle—which is somewhat like hearing one movement of a symphony.) The prayer draws the disciples, the church and the world into the language of the son dwelling in the Father: "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me." Finally, the prayer anticipates the coming of the Comforter.

In *The Good Wine*: *Reading John from the Center*, Father Bruno Barnhart writes:

> This prayer is an epiclesis (i.e., a calling down of the Holy Spirit) over the bread of the words of the Word, the wine of words of the Spirit, which he has set out among them. The bread will be broken, the wine poured, upon the cross. He lifts his eyes and prays that the fire may descend to fill these words and figures with the reality which they have evoked as in shadow. Jesus' prayer is a sacrificial invocation, a flame which gathers all of the themes and words of the supper into itself, and bears them upward ritually to the Father, calling for the returning flame of the Spirit.

Jesus asked that those who love him might approach the throne where he abides in glory at the right hand of the Father. "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." We have so little time to contemplate these mysteries. We make so little time. Our culture, even in

the church, values this kind of time in prayer so little. We dismiss wonder so ruthlessly. Who encourages simple, prayerful awe? Who passes on the secrets of the dark becoming luminous?

Next week, we'll celebrate the active struggle of life again in Pentecost and the call to go to the ends of the earth as messengers of the gospel. And before we are sent into the world, we will have to remember and understand deeply the implications of Jesus' prayer that "they may all be one."

But in this brief time, these ten days of Ascension, we are given the gift of waiting in reverence, love, joy, wonder. Even if we sit in adoration of the mystery of the Trinity only once a year, it is enough to remind us why we are so driven the rest of the time. Let us worship in the beauty of holiness.