

Words of incarnate life (John 17:6-19)

by [Maureen Dallison Kemeza](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

For some the words of scripture pierce the heart and enlighten the darkened mind. But for others scripture is opaque, archaic or so overwritten by prior interpretations—brilliant or deadening—that they cannot read it without a cacophony of contending viewpoints clamoring in the back of their minds. This much is inarguable: unless one receives it like a child, one cannot enter the kingdom of scripture.

The narrative of Jesus' ascension is a case in point. When I was a child I read about Jesus' final departure from this earth in a richly illustrated children's Bible. In my child's imagination all things were possible, and I pictured the Lord, his hands and feet still scarred from terrible suffering, white robes billowing, ascending into high white clouds on that brilliant spring Thursday. In my picture, the Lord faced away from me and down toward the disciples, his hand raised toward them in blessing—or was it good-bye? As his figure diminished into the infinite distance, they stood astonished. They wondered what to make of the event and worried about its implications for themselves.

Now that we have put away childish things, including an unrestrained imagination and purity of heart, what can we make of the ascension? What can it communicate to an aging heart seasoned by permanent losses? I know now what it is to watch a loved one disappear from sight. Does the biblical picture of Jesus' ascension bear any affinity to that searing experience of separation that we all will undergo?

The incarnation could be the interpretive connection between our experience of final separation and the story of Jesus' ascension. Christian theology claims that in Jesus, God entered human life. As far as I can tell, that means that the holy One entered life and death without reservation in order to communicate the presence of divinity to every precious hour of living and dying. Incarnation implies that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," to quote Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. The universe is a sacrament of the presence of God.

If the incarnation affirms that nothing human is alien to God, I would like to know what happened when Jesus left this world for good. What was it really like between him and those left behind? What happens when we leave this world for good? Does the circle of love remain unbroken?

It is interesting to note that in Mark, Jesus' prayer takes place during the final meal. It is part of what scholars call the farewell discourse. In other words, Jesus prays *on earth*. In John's Gospel, by contrast, Jesus' raising up and glorification encompasses the crucifixion, the resurrection and his return to the Father. Taken out of context and read for the liturgy commemorating the ascension, the prayer seems to be spoken at the throne of the triune God as a plea by the risen Lord on behalf of those who remain on earth. It delivers a different picture of where the prayer is uttered: in heaven, not on earth. But the prayer was an earthly prayer, uttered under pressure of imminent arrest and execution. It was an anguished and torn good-bye, an interior monologue that expresses Jesus' intimacy with and love for both the Father and the disciples.

Historically, this Gospel was written after Jesus' death—in John's terms, after Jesus' glorification and return to the Father. Evidently, the author's purpose was to sustain a community of disciples in their belief in Jesus as the Son of God, thereby to strengthen their resolve to withstand fierce opposition. Viewed historically, John 17:6-19 is a prayer from the One who has died, composed by a living theological poet in order to express a community's longing for sustained connection with the One who is the source of their identity and their hope.

I often turn to poets for words of incarnate life. Like Jesus and John, great poets face reality squarely and openly and write about it. In "Promissory Note," for example, Galway Kinnell writes to an unnamed beloved about the imagined moment of his own passing. "If I die before you . . . / I will cross over into you / and ask you to carry / not only your own memories / but mine too . . ." (from *Strong Is Your Hold*).

Irish poet Seamus Heaney wrote a cycle of sonnets in memory of his mother. One sonnet describes the moment of her death, when she was surrounded by her husband and grown children after an anguished vigil. "The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep, it penetrated / Clearances that suddenly stood open" (from "Clearances 7," *Selected Poems 1966-1987*).

In the final sonnet of the cycle, Heaney uses the image of a chestnut tree that he'd grown up with to allude obliquely to his primal loss: "Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere, / A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for" (from "Clearances 8").

These poems offer rich phrases that help us to imagine some human facets of the experience of Jesus' dying and glorification. Like the poetry of John's Gospel, these phrases suggest the depth of love incarnate in hearts of flesh and blood.

To the disciples, in the season after Jesus' death when he appeared to a gathering of people, or when the disciples encountered him in a stranger, or when they watched him being taken into heaven like Elijah being whirled away, it was as though he had "crossed over." Finally they understood: he was "emptied into us to keep." Now they would be his body and his blood in the world; they would listen for his spirit, "beyond silence listened for."