

**Sunday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Sunday of the Ascension**

**Readings: Acts 1:1-11, Psalm 93, Ephesians 1: 15-23, Luke 24:44-53**

**Getting Easter Faith Right: A Celebration of Ascended Women, *not Just Mother's Day***

### **Introduction**

*Chocolat* (Producer David Brown, 2000) depicts the resurrection, the ascension, the dramatic renewal of a community dying from its own repressive, asphyxiating *tranquillité*. The story unravels around two figures: the mayor, the Comte de Reynaud, a patriarchal Catholic traditionalist who takes great pride in his despotic family history – most notably – his ancestor, an earlier count who persecuted the French Protestant Huguenots from the village of *Lansquenet-sous-Tannes*; and Vianne Rocher, a free-wheeling, atheistic, unmarried mother who as it happens is an expert *chocolatier*. These two were never going to get on; and they don't. For the Comte, she represents all that is wrong with modernity: the questioning of authority, unbelief, 'loose' morals, and feminist passion. For Vianne, he represents all that is wrong with tradition: Catholic absolutism, and male autocracy.

As the narrative unfolds, we find the deadening hand of Christian faith beginning to lose its sway over the people who tire of narrow conformity and intolerant quietude. Even the Comte suffers under his own starched and stiffened morality, unable to acknowledge, even to himself, that his wife left him years before, probably because he was intolerable. Finally, he breaks-down in his guerrilla campaign for 'good', overwhelmed by the chocolate, the staff of life, displayed in the *chocolaterie* window. His break-down, his deconstruction, leads to leading to both his and the town's reconstruction, re-humanization. Faith finally becomes life affirming not life deadening!

### **Readings**

What has this got to do with Ascension Sunday? A lot really! But we have to do a little bit of digging in order to understand how or why?

The late Erich Fromm, a much loved and respected German philosopher, who wrote up to the 1970s, used to distinguish between authoritarian and humanitarian forms of religion. Authoritarian religion is preoccupied with power rather than justice or love; it is obsessed with the need for order and is for-ever fearful of chaos; it is neurotic in the sense that it always demands obedience. Humanitarian religion on the other hand, prioritizes love over power, is more concerned with justice over order, and is not repressive, but life affirming. Fromm saw Jesus in this latter light: as the humanitarian Jewish mystic

With Fromm's insight in mind, let us turn to the Ascension! Ascension Sunday occurs at the end of the Easter season, resurrection Sunday marking its beginning. They are like two goal posts and the Easter season falls between them. Both resurrection and ascension are difficult to get the modern mind around, and this for two reasons: first we have never seen anyone resurrected or ascended – and for the modern mind, let's remember, seeing is believing. And second, both resurrection and ascension are metaphors, ancient metaphors, linguistic ways of constructing ideas and beliefs which we moderns don't easily get. Why? Because the ancients

saw reality differently, they saw the creation in quite different pre-scientific pictorial terms, terms of three tiers, three floors: the underworld (sheol), the flat earth and then the heavens, the latter the realm of the Gods: we don't! But with that world-view, the ascension is all about Jesus' re-inclusion, re-assimilation back into God after his life, death and resurrection; from the earth back to heaven. So what! The question for us is this: what did the metaphor of the ascension mean? Once we get that we can then interpret it for modern reality, modern experience.

The ascension of Jesus is *not* about the once human Jesus escaping back to the spirit world to be with Dad: it is not about Jesus calling out to God, "Beam me up" as if he were starrng in science fiction – quite the contrary. The modern artist, Salvador Dalí gets it. If you look at the image of the ascending Jesus below, what stands out are Jesus' dirty feet: in other words, the ascension is all about the *transformation of reality, this broken reality, this scarred reality, this dirty reality, this human reality to something more – but* a reality nevertheless that is embodied, real, tangible. The ascension, like the resurrection is about *reality renewed*: as the British biblical scholar, NT Wright says, "It is new heavens and a new earth with new bodies to live in and a new politics that serves all".

That is precisely why the disciples are told when left gazing into the heavens in the reading from Acts, cut it, you have a job to do here: recreate the world, build a human reality that may be human, a human reality that may be loving and just, a human reality that may be humane. Build a reality so that people *will be as gods!*

## **Women**

So if an ascended reality looks to be something that is life-affirming not life-deadening, human, humane, loving and just: what does that mean for women? Surely that they become more! In my pastoral work over the years, whether in Latin America, Asia or Africa, in the US or Australia, what has been a constant has been the *battered-ness of women in the physical, emotional and social senses of the term; the struggle against patriarchal structures to be recognised as more*. My difficulty with Mother's Day is not that women are often mothers – that is a cause for celebration – but that women are enshrined in, reduced to being mothers, diminished to their biological capacities; that women are not recognized as more than mothers: as partners, as professionals, through whose skills, intelligence and wisdom, the common good is constructed. The tragedy of the developing world when examined from a gender point-of-view, is that women are excluded and *everyone becomes less, everyone is diminished*.

Back to the movie *Chocolat!* It is no accident that in this movie, as the old authoritarian patriarchal religious model collapses, women find their voice, find a new place: Vianne shows the way, and women like Josephine, the victim of a violent husband, follow. *Chocolat* in a sense is a celebration of an ascended world, *especially an ascended womanhood*.

Today let us celebrate motherhood yes. But let us do more than that in this place! Let us celebrate womanhood, the ascension of women!

