

Flight-Seeing

April 26, 2008

If anyone loves mountains, they should fly in day-time on a sunny day up the north-western coast of the United States and Canada, say from Seattle to Anchorage in Alaska. Beneath them stretch out, often on both sides of the airplane, the splendors of the lofty Northern Rockies in an uninterrupted series for hours on end, a spectacle no way to be compared with that provided by the mere half-hour crossing of these mountains between east and west.

And if, when such a traveller arrived in Anchorage, he still admired the long snow-capped horizon framing that city to the east, then he should try, as I did a few days ago, "flight-seeing." I had never before heard the expression, but its meaning in Alaska is not difficult to guess – you get into a little four-seater airplane and go flying up amongst the glaciers and peaks for an hour and a half.

Not even mountaineers who conquer the peaks on foot can enjoy such an overview of the majestic scenery as flying provides. Clambering at first upwards like the trees, but then leaving them behind, one lifts above rocks and snow, then above more and more snow, amidst ever higher peaks, with an intimacy and freedom such as only flying can give. One is so effortlessly close to the majestic slopes dazzling in the sunshine that one could think one was their companion . . . but they remain silent, quite silent, as though mocking the mechanical fly that intrudes on their nobility.

For let no-one say they are dead! Local inhabitants who watch them year round comment on their constant change by way of mist and light and wind and cloud, and such change is surely effect rather than cause of their life, because the mountains present a prospect of infinitely more power than that of any of the fickle phenomena of weather at play amongst them.

Nor let anyone say the mountains are serene! With their zig-zag outlines, jagged crests, precipitous sides, they evoke, according to all sane geology, that cosmic upheaval which tore up the surface of the globe and gave us earth's present mountain ranges, the tortured up-thrust of titanic masses of granite and rock, driven, crashing, crumpling into one another.

That upheaval was the Flood of Noah's time, some 5,000 years ago. That Flood was the result of men's "corrupting their ways" – Scripture's own words. Earth's mountains are then monuments of the grandeur of God, to be sure, but also of his wrath. Mankind has now again corrupted its ways, so . . .

Kyrie eleison.