

May 16, 2021
The Ascension of the Lord

Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11 - p.158
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9
Ephesians 4:1-13
Mark 16:15-20

Men of Galilee, why gaze in wonder at the heavens?
This Jesus whom you saw ascending into heaven
will return as you saw Him go. Alleluia.

This morning's antiphon does well in introducing the tenor for this morning's homily because we too like the disciples can find ourselves looking up in the sky and wondering, "What just happened here? Where are you Jesus? What are we going to do now Lord?"

Subsequently we may wonder, and I am sure we all have at one time or other, why do we keep coming together each Sunday to worship God in the particular manner that we do? I am sure many of our family and/or friends may have asked similar questions. Thus it is reasonable to reply that we continue to faithfully participate in the Sacred Mysteries because if we fail to remember our history – we will soon forget our history, and if we forget our history we will soon forget that it is His-story and not our own that is most important.

Subsequently, one of the things we do each time we come to celebrate in the Sacred Liturgy is to purposefully confess a fundamental belief concerning Jesus, - and that fundamental belief or doctrine is that,

For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and His kingdom will have no end.

Hence the reason why we repeat the Nicene Creed each time we celebrate in the Mass? We dare not forget. On that note there are probably a plentitude of answers we might offer as to why we recite a written creed each Sunday, but the best one that I can think of at the moment was given to us by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy 11 some 3,400 years ago when he wrote,

But be careful lest your heart be so lured away that you serve other gods and bow down to them. For then the anger of the Lord will flare up against you and He will close up the heavens, so that no rain will fall, and the soil will not yield its crops, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.

Therefore, take these words of mine into your heart and soul. . . Teach them to your children, speaking of them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up, . . . so that, as long as the heavens are above the earth, you and your children may live on in the land which the Lord swore to your ancestors He would give them (Deuteronomy 11).

In other words, there is an old adage that suggests that, “if you don’t use it, you will loose it.” Following the same line of logic it would be reasonable to assume that, “if you don’t repeat it, you will soon

forget it,” and unfortunately the reality of this statement is all too often true.

Therefore we need to constantly remind ourselves of these truths, and teach them to our children so that they may practice the one true faith, hence one of the reasons why today we are celebrating *The Ascension of the Lord*.

In the grand schema of Christian topics *The Ascension of the Lord* is one of those topics that does not get a whole lot of attention, other than possibly once or twice a year, and that mostly because of the lectionary-reading schedule. Subsequently, many folks fail to remember that theologically there are many deeper spiritual truths involved with the Ascension than a minimal acknowledgement that Jesus rose up into the clouds and returned to His Father.

In essence - the Ascension culminates the Easter season in the fact that even though Jesus would no longer be physically with the disciples; His ascension would soon serve as a prelude to Pentecost and the reception of the Holy Spirit.

So then for starters lets briefly consider some of the historical information that we have available from the Bible. For some three and a half years the disciples had followed Jesus as He criss-crossed the Judean topography introducing people to His Father and a radical new way of life. After He had been crucified, died, and was resurrected, He appeared to them on numerous occasions comforting, instructing, and preparing them for His soon departure.

So far, so good, thus this background information brings us current in the celebration of the liturgical year. Subsequently we are now ready to proceed a little deeper into the mystery of redemption.

I know we have been reading from the Gospel of Mark, but I would like to continue by first referencing the *Ascension* from St Luke's gospel. The closing passages of St. Luke's Gospel describe Jesus taking the disciples back to Bethlehem of Galilee, back where it all started in the first place. Jesus lead them back to the very same place where His ministry with them all began, and when His time had come to leave, "He lifted His hands and blessed them, and now it came to pass, while He blessed them He was parted from them and carried up into Heaven." As a result, the Scriptures state that; "they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continuing in the temple praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:51-53 NKJV).

(Another reason we continue to commune each Sunday.)

Needless to say, while Jesus was preparing to leave their physical company and return to the Father we can only imagine how difficult His eminent departure must have been for the disciples. What were they going to do now that Jesus would no longer be present with them? Even though, He promised that He would come back for them, they must have been wondering just how long it would be before He returned to take them home with Him?

As a side note, today the same curiosity still exists; what are we supposed to be doing, and needless to say, the fascination with the end times is still accompanied with a plenitude of speculations and theories. Seemingly, we all want to know when He will return? After all, one certainly would not want to be caught sleeping on the job, so to speak.

However, going back to the actual *Ascension* event itself; it is interesting to note that at this point in the Scriptures the disciples

appeared to have been as confused as we are today. For example, wondering what was going to happen next the book of Acts records that some of the disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

Jesus put the issue to rest by saying, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Acts 1:6-8). Notice that St Luke’s focus is more centered on the Holy Spirit who will continue to empower his disciples to live in the now and accomplish their calling and mission in life. Indeed, so too our lives ought to be more focused on the work of the Holy Spirit and less on worrying about when Jesus will return the second time.

In today’s gospel reading, St Mark connects the Gospels together to add another layer of depth to the spiritual formation of the disciples. Before Jesus was lifted up into the heavens and out of sight - Jesus challenged them with these instructions, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

You see, and we have talked about this before, conversion is more than just a simple decision to accept Christ into one’s heart. Indeed, a decision is only the first part of a process; albeit we might say a first step in regard to our spiritual formation; however, conversion is the life-long process that begins with hearing the good news, believing, and then responding by learning how to love the Lord and work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Jesus was very detailed in His commission. He said, go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded (See Matthew 28:18-20).

During the past few weeks we have talked a lot about what Jesus said, if you love me you will keep my commandments. Here we recall once again what Moses said to the people, write these things on the tablets of your hearts, and then teach them to the children? Why - so that you might live.

This truth reminds me of an illustration we have used before but it bears repeating. The Rabbis, when asked, "How do you teach a person to observe the Sabbath rest" they will most assuredly reply, "It cannot be done. They must learn in the context of a supportive community that actively keeps the Sabbath."

It was with this same Jewish thought in mind that Jesus said, "Go, into the world and proclaim the gospel and whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned."

The words of Jesus are very pointed concerning the plight of those who will not believe. In order to teach our children and others what it means to believe in Christ we must be mindful of Scripture, sacred Tradition, and our intentions to remain in the vine along with all the other people in the local faith community.

Now back to today's gospel reading where we come to a somewhat controversial passage of Scripture. Jesus mentioned that signs would accompany those who believe. Scholars still debate whether or not the particular signs mentioned in St. Mark's account were

added later to reinforce the historical authority of the apostles against that of the heretics, and/or whether or not these signs are literally supposed to follow you and me as well.

I have met, and maybe you have too, people who spoke in tongues. I have witnessed people being delivered from demons and healed of all types of illness; yet I have yet to pick up any poisonous snakes or drink any deadly poisons, or raise the dead. So does that mean that I and/or you do not believe? Somehow I think Jesus had something else in mind in this particular situation. Yes these miracles have happened, and yes they may very well happen again, but I find it hard to believe that signs and wonders are absolutely obligatory in order to be a believer in Christ.

Why, because greater than any sign mentioned in the Bible is the commandment given by Jesus to, "love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Therefore, because love is the greatest gift anyone can have or offer, - and the only gift that remains- and because unfortunately we are familiar with people who in their lives have taken strong positions with their supposed giftedness with little demonstration of love, I think it prudent to say that we ought to be seeking to manifest love before desiring any outward manifestations of signs and wonders (see 1 Corinthians 13).

One thing for sure, the signs and wonders, if it is God's will in that particular situation, will follow those who love God and keep His commandments.

So then as we close, let us be ever diligent to remember to teach our children and exemplify to others the ancient truths of the Early Church. These truths are recorded in the Bible and in the history of the Early Church. Tradition also teaches that the way we worship

determines what we believe and therefore what we believe will determine how we will live our lives. All the more reason to bring the children to Mass even if they don't totally understand – they will learn by watching others worship and thus they will believe in Christ and live their lives accordingly.

Therefore even though the world around us might seem to be in chaos let us be encouraged because in the same manner as Jesus ascended, He will return again. Having completed this phase of His mission in this world as its Redeemer Christ, Jesus returned to our Father in Heaven. Here it was once stated, “For it is in ascending to the Father that He raises earth to heaven with Him!”¹

And so it is with great joy and peace in our hearts that we purpose to celebrate the fact that when we believe and have been baptized into Christ - then we can be assured that wherever He is we too are there with Him – as St Paul proclaims, “For in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

¹ See <http://www.theologic.com/oflweb>.