

The Ascension of Our Lord, May 28, 2017

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

Today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of Our Lord. After his resurrection, having spent forty days with his disciples, our Lord ascends to his beloved Father. Indeed this feast of the Ascension of Jesus to his Father is a Mystery and not easy to grasp but at the same time it marks the beginning of the Mission of the Church. In today's Gospel we have the farewell scenario between the disciples and Jesus and we read the intimate moment of separation between friends. As he prepares to depart from the earth he offers them his parting gifts: the gift of understanding so that they can now fully comprehend the meaning of the Scriptures; the promise that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit; a final loving blessing and promise that he will not abandon them but be with them till the end of times. He gives them the command to preach the Good News to all nations. The reaction of the disciples indicates a striking transformation. Luke tells us that they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, praising and worshipping God. They were now certainly different from that little group of disciples in the cenacle, hiding from all authorities in Jerusalem, afraid of them. Now they are new persons, strengthened with faith, filled with joy and carrying the hope of the future. The Lord instructed them to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the world but they were also told to await the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Heavenly messengers stand beside the apostles as an evidence of God's continued assistance. The first reading of today tells us of the fact of the Ascension and the way Jesus bids farewell to the disciples. In the second reading Paul tells us that God has made Jesus the Head over all things for the Church, which is His Body. In other words, Jesus is the invisible Leader and Head of the visible Church that He has established on earth.

This Feast of the Ascension commemorates the completion of the earthly work of redemption of Jesus and his elevation into Heaven by His own power. This took place in the presence of His disciples on the fortieth day of his Resurrection. Through his numerous apparitions to hundreds of people between the Day of his Resurrection and his Ascension, Jesus proved two things: First he makes the disciples aware that he is the promised Messiah. Second, he assures them that he has already overcome death, and those who persevere in their faith shall also overcome death and inherit the Kingdom of God forever. He promises them the

Holy Spirit who will be with them and guide them and they will be his witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The Gospel of Matthew tells us of the great commission that was given to the Apostles by Jesus. Prior to granting this authority to proclaim, Jesus convinces them of his own power and tells them that he always enjoyed such an authority from his Father. He convinces them that he has all authority in Heaven and on earth which is given to him by the Father. Soon after this Jesus their beloved master was taken up from among their midst and the angels tell them to go and search for him among the living and not among the dead. They assure the apostles that the Lord will come back to them as they had seen him go up to heaven accompanied by the clouds. They are now called upon to think in a new way, to visualize Jesus as a universal person.

The First Reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke narrates the events of the early church to his friend Theophilus as he has already given him an orderly account in his earlier book about what Jesus had done and taught from the beginning of His ministry until the day when he was taken up to Heaven. Prior to his departure he gave special instructions to the apostles whom He had chosen. He gives an account of his ministry of preaching, teaching and fellowship where Jesus allowed them to talk to him and even touch him. Then Jesus commanded the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until such time as they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of the promise of the Father. He even corrects their doubts and explains them of the meaning of the kingdom. He tells them that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He tells them that Ascension is the culmination of his mission on earth. After this a cloud covered him and took him away from them and he disappeared from their sight. As they were still wondering of the event they received the message that Jesus shall return to them in the same way as he was taken up into Heaven.

In today's Second Reading Paul tells the Ephesians that while waiting that ultimate moment with the Father, we should lead a life worthy of the vocation to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are reminded that there is One Body of Christ and one Spirit of God. The Body of Christ is the Church which is Holy, Catholic and

Apostolic, which Jesus instituted on earth. To this Body and Spirit, we have been called to the one hope of our calling, to one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Paul reminds the Ephesians of the marvellous generosity and goodness of God who had made them one in Jesus and called them to be sharers of the glory of Christ which was the eternal glory of God. God made Jesus the Head over all things for the Church, which is His Body. In other words, Jesus is the invisible anointed Leader and Head of the visible Catholic Church that He has established on earth. Now through the Blood of the Cross, the New Adam, Jesus, has repossessed what was rightfully His, dominion over all creations. Jesus prayed that God would enlighten their minds to try to understand and appreciate the marvellous things God had done for them through incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. He prayed that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation as they come to know Him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may realize the hope to which Jesus has called them.

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Second, Jesus tells them of the present situation as he gives the command to "make disciples" of people everywhere. He now introduces them to his mission as he passes on his own authority to his disciples. Pentecost will be the confirmation of this. They are asked to do what he himself did. They now have the power to reconcile the sinful persons with God and with the community and to decide who are not yet ready for reconciliation and full participation in the community's life. The community has standards to keep in order to be a living and credible witness of Jesus and his Gospel. It has a corporate right to maintain those standards. They are to teach, to heal, reconcile and heal the divisions that separate people from one another. They are told to baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and incorporate them as his disciples. Thirdly, he promises them his real presence and leads them into the future. He is with his followers, will be close to them and will be with them to the end of time. It is the fulfillment of his promise that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he will be among them. The gift of the Spirit is not mentioned but is clearly implied by the promise of the ongoing presence of Jesus.

As we celebrate the feast of the Ascension, we remember the "exaltation" of Jesus, as he is raised up to share the glory of his Father. Before his departure he introduces his disciples to their mission. Jesus, who confined himself to the people of Israel, now tells them to continue his work all over the world. They will be able to do what Jesus himself did not do, namely to proclaim the word to all. He tells them that those who believe in him will also do the works that he has been doing. He promises them that greater works than these he will do for them because he is going to the Father. They now have the mission to preach the Gospel to the whole world. This mission involves the call to evangelize people, to continue the healing work of Jesus, to preach the good news after being enriched by the power of the Holy Spirit. At this juncture Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit to them. The reception of the Holy Spirit was very important because He had been chosen and sent by the Father and the Son to sustain Christianity in a new era of sacred history, the era of the Church and its mission. He tells them that the Christian community is never alone. They will have the Trinitarian presence of the Father, the Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This presence will give new life to the Church. Hence the feast of Ascension reminds us that Jesus is present with us in the church. He is present in His apostolic Church, in the Holy Eucharist, in the

word of God and in the Christian community. As mysterious as it appears, while He has ascended, our faith affirms to us that He is still here with us.

The feast of Ascension is part of what we call the Paschal Mystery. There are four inter-related parts: suffering and death; resurrection; ascension; and the sending of the Spirit. They are closely interlocked as one reality. If the resurrection says that the crucified Jesus is alive, the Ascension says that the living Jesus has entered into glory, sharing on an equal level the glory of his Father. At the same time the feast affirms that Jesus is the Messiah. Luke emphasized that the proclaiming of repentance and the forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in His Name, which is the messianic task. This emphasis, in "His Name," shifts the faith of the believers from Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, to the Person of Jesus. Therefore St Paul tells us that in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell bodily. At the same time the Ascension opened the door for the beginning of the Divine ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel tells us that Jesus raised His hands and blessed his disciples. The blessing of Jesus was not just an ordinary blessing but the blessing of the True High Priest, who is returning to his Father. This same Jesus who has gone to his Father will come again to gather together and save those eagerly waiting for him.

The Ascension of our Lord took place a long time ago but his parting words are still vibrant to us and must be carried out courageously to be his witnesses in the world of today like the first Apostles. Hence the feast of the Ascension is not to commemorate a departure but the celebration of the living and lasting presence of Jesus in the church. He the Lord, the living head of his Body, the Church, remains always with us as he promised, but now in a new way. He is spiritually present. In fact by this celebration we proclaim that the risen Jesus enters into the fullness of the glory given him by his Father. For the followers of Jesus, his presence with them can make this earth, the daily life, a real heaven. In order to continue to be present with his disciples, and make them truly experience him, Jesus had to leave them. His "old" presence in one human body, in one small corner of the world, was able to reach only a small number of people, in one tiny period of history. But now this gives way to a new presence that will reach the whole world in every age. From now on wherever there is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, wherever there is truth, love, compassion, justice, freedom, beauty the Spirit of Jesus is there. Further he gives the Church his own Spirit to guide it into his mission. As we live this Ascension of

our Lord, let us look forward to experience him in our lives and be his messengers in the world of today.

A patient came to doctor's office seeking a hip replacement. His former cardiologist believed that the man's heart was too weak for him to survive a major operation. However, a new cardiologist had stated that while the man faced risks in undergoing surgery, his condition appeared stable. Therefore, he gave his permission to proceed. The patient soon passed all preliminary tests. Still, on surgery day there was tension in the room among the nurses, anesthesiologist, and doctor. Even the patient could likely sense this as well. He said, "Doctor, I know this is a busy time, but I would like to ask you for one moment to pray." In the 20 years of his medical practice, the doctor said that no patient had ever made such a request. All chatter ceased. With his heart monitor beeping in the background, the patient prayed for God to take care of him and all in the room who were trying to help him. He thanked God for the opportunity to get better, acknowledging the human limitations of the staff in trying to repair his fragile body. A sense of calm filled the room. The surgery was a success. In all his professional experience, the doctor never had felt more strongly than on that day the presence of God sent through the patient to him.

Years ago, a fishing fleet went out from a small harbour on the east coast of Newfoundland. In the afternoon there came a great storm. When night settled down, not a single vessel of all the fleet had found its way into the port. All night long, wives, mothers, children and sweethearts paced up and down the beach, wringing their hands and calling on God to save their loved ones. To add to the horror of the situation, one of the cottages caught fire. Since the men were all away, it was impossible to save the home. When the morning broke, to the joy of all, the entire fleet found safe harbour in the bay. But there was none face with a picture of despair – the wife of the man whose home had been destroyed. Meeting her husband as he landed, she cried, oh, husband, we are ruined. Our home and all it contained was destroyed by fire." But the man exclaimed, "Thank God for the fire. It was the light of our burning cottage that guided the whole fleet into port."

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