

Ascension of Our Lord May 17, 2015

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. This Feast commemorates the elevation of Christ into Heaven by his own power in the presence of his disciples on the fortieth day after his glorious Resurrection. Jesus after his resurrection spent forty days with his disciples instructing them and encouraging them as they prepared for the mission. The Ascension of Jesus into Heaven completed his earthly work of our redemption. Through his numerous apparitions to hundreds of people between the day of his glorious Resurrection and the day of his Ascension, Jesus proved two things. First of all, he proved that he was the promised Messiah. Secondly, he proved that through him who overcame death, persons who persevere in their living faith in Jesus shall also overcome death and inherit the Kingdom of God. In the first reading Jesus after his resurrection prepares his Apostles to preach the Gospel. Their message will reach the ends of the earth. The two strangers came to tell them that Jesus will come again as he is assumed into heaven and they will meet him for sure. In the second reading we are reminded of the gifts the ascended Jesus will bestow on the church. Here Paul reminds them of their special calling asking them to maintain the unity in the Spirit and build a bond of peace. In the Gospel Jesus commissions the disciples to go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News. He gives them the power to teach, preach and do the healing miracles in his name. He gives them the command to preach his kingdom to all nations.

This Feast of the Ascension is the completion of the earthly work 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 between the day of his Resurrection and his Ascension, Jesus showed them his messianic dignity and the assurance that they too having fulfilled the task given to them will also be raised to glory by the Father. He promised them the gift of 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 Spirit will teach them the wisdom of God and open them to the errors of the world. The Gospel of Mark tells us of the great commission that was given to the Apostles by Jesus as he was assumed into heaven. He had already explained to them of the power and authority given to him by his Father which would be theirs from now on. They had a mission to fulfil and he would be with them till the end of times.

The message that Jesus gave was very clear that they are to go into the entire world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved: but the one who does not believe will be condemned. In other words, those who do not believe and refuse to come to Jesus would be condemned. To those who believe, Jesus promises to bless them with spiritual signs. In his Name, they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. It is absolutely necessary that one be born of new life through water and Spirit in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Having said this, after being taken up into Heaven, the disciples went out and proclaimed the Good News everywhere. Today, we see the fruit of their work because Jesus worked with them and confirmed the messages by the signs that accompanied the Gospel. Even after he was taken up into heaven and they were filled with awe and uncertainty, the Angels come to them and assure them that the Lord will come back to them as they had seen him go up to heaven accompanied by the clouds.

In today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles Luke explains how for forty days, Jesus had appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, presenting himself to them and convincing them that he was alive. During this time he explained to them the Scriptures and spoke about the Kingdom of God. He ate and drank with them and spent his time with them strengthening them in their ministry. He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem until such time as they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit promised by the Father. Through his actions, Jesus was opening the eyes of his disciples about his mission. Some of them even at this time did not fully understand him and asked for the day of the political restoration of Israel. With immense patience he told them that this restoration is in the eternal plan of the Father. Jesus then told the disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the eyes of the disciples would be opened. They would embrace a spiritual heart that would open their minds to the fact that the spiritual Kingdom of God has come on earth as it is in Heaven. They would perceive that this Kingdom of God embraces all the saints of the past, present and future who are baptized and receive the Spirit. For it is through the living faith in Christ and the Sacrament of Baptism that one is born again and qualifies to receive salvation and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. After this Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. When we say that Jesus was lifted up it simply means that Jesus disappeared from their view. He was raised up and a cloud received Him out of their sight into his Father's bosom.

In the second reading of today Paul reminds the Ephesians of the marvellous generosity and goodness of God who had made them Christians and sharers to be in the glory of Christ, who was the eternal glory of God. The words the Apostle wrote to the first converts were written for us also and are applicable even today. Paul prayed that God would enlighten their minds to try to understand and appreciate the marvellous things God had done for them through the incarnation, death and resurrection and finally the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul further prayed that God may give his Ephesian converts an ever deeper insight into the mercy and love of God the Father who made them members of Christ in the church and called them to share in the divine heritage. The Father raised Christ from the dead and gave him a principal place in heaven. From there he bestows plentiful graces and gifts on the church. Paul also prayed that the Father may also send his Spirit on the Ephesian Church. Through their calling they are called upon to partake in the eternal happiness in the Trinity. At the same time Paul speaks of the gifts especially the various charisms for ministry. Thus the Apostles and others are able to build up the body of Christ to its full stature. God gives in Jesus many gifts so that the community may live in harmony and peace.

The Ascension of the Lord is described three times in the New Testament: in the Gospels of Mark and Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles. Today's Gospel is taken from the concluding verses of Mark and describes clearly the post resurrection narrative concerning the apparitions of Jesus to the disciples. Within the context of the appearance, Jesus commissioned the disciples to undertake a worldwide mission of preaching the Gospel. The emphasis is on the universal nature of the mission for which the disciples had been prepared and sent. In the entire mystery of the Ascension, Jesus is portrayed as mandating a clear process for salvation. Those who hear the gospel and believe it are to be baptized and they will be saved. Those who do not believe it and are not baptized will be condemned. An authentic believer will be accompanied by the presence of signs. These include the casting out of demons, speaking in tongues, consuming deadly drinks and so on and will not be

harmful. But Jesus does not say that these signs are the test of believers. A true believer is the one who has faith in Jesus and is one with him.

The description of Ascension is as stark and straight forward as rest of the narratives presented by Mark in his Gospel. When Jesus had concluded all that he had to say to the disciples, he was taken up into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. Theologically this brings the story to a fitting conclusion. Jesus has come on earth to undertake a divine mission and that divine mission is completed with his death and his resurrection. The moment he said it is accomplished and offered his soul to his Father, the mission was fulfilled. The purpose of the Ascension was to return Jesus to the heavenly environment from which he originally came. The disciples are now charged and empowered to continue the mission of Jesus by proclaiming the gospel to every creature. Their work will receive divine approval through signs and miracles that God will bestow upon their ministry of proclamation. Jesus having completed his work has returned to the Father but the task of proclaiming the gospel to all continues in and through the work of the disciples.

Today on the day of the Ascension we commemorate that moment when Jesus entered into heaven. It is the day when Jesus in his risen body entered into the eternal glory of the Father. This day inaugurates a new era: the mission of the church. The gospel tells us that the disciples went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. At the same time Jesus kept in constant contact with the disciples. While ascending onto heaven he did not do so to abandon his chosen ones in the world. He rose up into Heaven in order to open to us its door, allowing to flow from his glorious Heart that abundance of grace and mercy which will be manifested by the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was necessary for Jesus to rejoin his Father in order that the Holy Spirit, who is common to them, might be sent into the whole world to prepare for the day of his return. It is true that Jesus had remained in the presence of the Father throughout his entire life. But now it was necessary that in his resurrected body he goes to the abode of the Father and be in his vision in order that the two of them, the Father and the Son, might jointly send the Spirit of Love who eternally unites them. Mark tells us that the Lord worked with them through the Holy Spirit and with him Jesus was also present. It is this Holy Spirit helps us to call the Lord Jesus as our divine master in whom we trust.

The celebration of the feast of the Ascension of our Lord, reminds us of 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 the nations. He told them that those who believe in him will also do the works that he has been doing. He promised them that greater works than these he will do for them because he was 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. The reception of the Holy Spirit was very important because Jesus 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 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. Jesus tells the disciples 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. Hence there are four aspects to this mission which Jesus gives in today's Gospel: to evangelize, that is, to communicate the life and vision of Jesus, to continue the healing mission of Jesus both physical and spiritual, to experience the power of the Holy Spirit, and experience the presence of Jesus. He will be with us till the end of times. Then Jesus promises us that like him we all will be raised and ascend to the Father. During the coming week, let us remember that Jesus, who has ascended into Heaven, is here with us, is present in our hearts, in his apostolic Church and in a special way present in the Holy Eucharist. 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.

Word spread across the countryside about the wise Holy Man who lived in a small house atop the mountain. A man from the village decided to make the long and difficult journey to visit him. When he arrived at the house, he saw an old servant inside the house that came forward to greet him at the door. "I would like to see the wise Holy Man," he said to the servant. The servant smiled and led him inside. As they walked through the house, the man from the village looked eagerly around the house, anticipating his encounter with the Holy Man. Before he knew it, he had been led to the back door and escorted outside. He stopped and turned to the servant, "But I want to see the Holy Man!" "You already have," said the old man. "Everyone you may meet in life, even if they appear plain and insignificant... see each of them as a wise Holy Man. If you do this, then whatever problem you brought here today will be solved."

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