

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 24: 46-53

Jesus said to his disciples, "So it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

REFLECTION 1:

GOODBYE

Today's Gospel scene and the Acts of the Apostles give us a goodbye scene. Jesus' ascension reminds us of the 'other place' or 'better country' noted in Hebrews (11: 16) to which we have all been called. Jesus has gone before us to be with God, but not without the promise that one day we will be with him forever. We cling to this promise 'with hoops of steel' and on this promise we hang our hopes. Luke the Evangelist presents us today with Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. Having shown them the marks of his crucifixion and eaten with them, he turned to the sacred texts to help them appreciate that all these recent events were part of God's saving plan. Only in the light of Jesus' resurrection can the scriptures of old be fully understood.

Luke mentioned that Bethany was the location where Jesus departed. Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem, had been the place where Jesus visited Mary and later raised Lazarus from the dead. There, Jesus was anointed in the house of Simon the leper and it was from Bethany that Jesus began his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. How fitting it was that Jesus should also make this triumphant departure from Bethany, having accomplished all that he had been sent to do.

After explaining that all that had been promised was being fulfilled, Jesus blessed his disciples and promised them the spirit and commissioned them to continue his mission. That mission, as stated earlier in Luke's Gospel, was to 'bring glad tidings to the poor; to proclaim liberty to captives and to give sight to the blind, release to the imprisoned and to announce a year of favour from the Lord' (Luke 4). In the final two verses of our second reading (Eph. 1: 17-23), Christ is described as the head of the church, which is his body. The church is represented here as the complement of Christ just as the eyes of the mind cannot become effective without the body, the tremendous action of Jesus Christ cannot be made effective without the work of the church. Christ is the head, but we are the hands and feet. Christ is over all, but graciously empowers us to participate in the process.

There's an old legend that sums up this great truth. After his time on earth, Jesus rose to heaven, where he continued to bear the marks of the cross. One day Gabriel said, 'Master, you must have suffered terribly for those people down there'. 'I did' said Jesus. Said the archangel, 'Do they know what you did for them?' 'Oh no'. said Jesus, 'Not yet, just a few in Palestine know, Peter, James and John and some others who will make it their life's work to tell others about me, until everyone in every place knows what I have done'. A look of doubt spread over Gabriel's face. 'What if the people who came after them grew tired and old? What if they forgot? Haven't you made other plans?' Jesus answered, 'I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them'.

As the body of Christ in the world, it is our role to live, to speak, to love and serve in such a manner that others will want to know the good news of salvation.

REFLECTION 2:

THE HAPPY ENDING

St Luke is the only Gospel writer who mentions Christ's Ascension and he tells the story in two different ways. In his Gospel Luke tells us that late in the evening of the day Jesus was raised, he took his disciples from Jerusalem to Bethany and 'while he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven' (Lk: 24: 46-53). In the Book of Acts, we read that the risen Christ continued to appear to his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection. On the 40th day, he charged them to be witnesses, 'to the ends of the Earth' and then 'as they were watching he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1: 1-11). Even though the stories are different, their purpose was the same: Christ's ascension signified the beginning of the universal reign of Christ.

The Ascension is a facet of that unique jewel we call the Easter mystery and it is not an event to be viewed in isolation. Between Easter Day and Pentecost, we celebrate the time of transition during which the risen Jesus vanishes from the sight of the disciples, only to open up a new way of relating to them. What a strange path led Jesus to that glory! For the disciples their hopes and dreams were that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but after he was put to death, their dream was reduced to rubble - a humiliated, suffering Messiah was unthinkable. Searching the scriptures, the disciples gradually came to understand that glory was attained through suffering - first the pain, then the joy.

The Ascension must always remain a mystery, for it attempts to put into words what is beyond words and to describe what is beyond description. It was unthinkable that the appearances of Jesus should grow fewer and fewer until finally they petered out. There had to come a day when the Jesus of Earth finally became the Jesus of Heaven.

For the disciples, the Ascension was three things. It was an Ending - the days when their faith was a belief in a flesh and blood person and now that flesh and blood person was no more. Now they were linked with someone who was forever independent of space and time. Equally it was a beginning. The disciples did not leave the scene heartbroken, they left with great joy, because now they knew they had a master from whom no being could separate them for ever more. 'I am sure' says Paul 'that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Surely, for us it is the most precious thing of all to know that in heaven there awaits us that self-same Jesus who on earth was kindness itself. To die is not to go out into the dark, but to Christ who ceaselessly pleads our case in the presence of the heavenly Father, the font of mercy. Jesus Christ is the contemporary of everyone and his saving power is truly universal. The Ascension sounds the depths of human leave taking. Jesus has gone home, but has left us an inestimable treasure, his abiding presence in his Spirit and in the Eucharist and an assurance that where he is, praise the Lord, one day we hope to be.