

## THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

*Gospel: Mark 16:15-20*

Jesus said to his disciples,

“Go into all the 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. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my 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.”

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

### REFLECTION 1:

### JESUS GOES HOME

A high point in a relay race is the moment when one runner passes the baton to another runner. More races are won or lost at that moment in the race. The Ascension of Jesus might be compared to the passing of the baton. Jesus passes the baton of God's kingdom to his disciples and so on to us, to complete the work he began on earth. The Ascension of Jesus is the liberation from all restrictions of time and space. It does not represent his removal from earth, but his constant presence everywhere on earth.

On the spot where tradition holds that Jesus ascended into heaven, Mount Olivet, a circular shaped church was erected as early as 387 A.D. Later the Crusaders restored it; it was taken over as a mosque in 1187 A.D. and is now in the care of the Franciscan Fathers. When I visited Jerusalem in 1974 and again in 1990, I photographed that hallowed place where legend says that Jesus actually ascended. St. Ignatius Loyola, while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land noted the imprint of a foot that might attest to be that of the ascending Christ.

After leaving us as a physical presence the disciples of Jesus needed instructions to be able to get on with the business of the Gospel and in today's first reading, Jesus tells his disciples 'you will be witnesses for me to the ends of the earth'. This command of Jesus includes all of us. By our baptism and confirmation we go even further, they call on us to do more and in our Gospel today, Jesus says, 'Proclaim the good news to all creation'. That too is something all of us must do. The disciples' service to the good news would begin in Jerusalem; extend to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This would make up the proper preparedness for welcoming the return of Jesus Christ and for us who continue to watch and wait the agenda remains the same.

The Ascension gave the disciples the assurance that they now had a friend, not only on this planet, but also in heaven – someone to whom they could address their cares and worries and who is present continually to put in a good word for them and for us with the Heavenly Father. It is consoling to know that in heaven, there awaits us that self same Jesus, who on earth was kindness itself. So, to die is not to wander out into the dark alone, but rather going home to a life-long friend who is hospitable, kind and infinitely forgiving. And so the friends of Jesus went back to Jerusalem, 'continually in the Temple praising God'.

Let's close with these words of Jesus to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. 'You are like a light for the whole world, a city built on a hill cannot be hidden – in the same way your light must shine before people, so they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven (Matt. 5: 16).

## REFLECTION 2:

## TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

To my mind the best Ascension story comes from the Acts of the Apostles. To start with, Luke recalls his whole Gospel in a few opening lines reviewing Jesus' last 40 days on earth. He describes Jesus' post-resurrection activity as 'giving instructions by the Holy Spirit' – taking the disciples through a process rather than teaching them a doctrine. He gave them, as it were, a bird's eye view, revisiting every conversion Jesus had called for from the beginning which would only come to a completion through the work of the Holy Spirit. Some of Jesus' disciples hadn't really understood the message as they were asking him how soon all their dreams for the future would come through, 'restoring the kingdom to Israel'. Jesus avoided their question and tried for the last time to re-orient them. They will understand what real power is when they would receive the Holy Spirit.

There are many ways that we could describe what Jesus wanted his disciples and their successors to understand. Paul said it in our second reading today when he prayed that the Spirit who offers wisdom and revelation would enlighten the eyes of our minds. He called on Christians to 'live a life worthy of the calling you have received' (Eph. 1). We receive our call in community, where the Spirit gifts each, and we are all called to the same hope.

When Jesus disappeared and the disciples were sky gazing, two men in white appeared and questioned why they were just standing around staring into the void. There was no time to mope, no time to feel sorry for themselves. There was a great message of good news to be preached and lived out. When we consider that there was no social media in those days, no TV or radio or anything other than a word-of-mouth means of spreading the message, it is truly remarkable how exciting and freeing the good news of great joy was to so many people. This same message has been presented and offered to us this very day – we are loved, cherished and treasured. It all happened because our God is love, and love has no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, and penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope. Our job now is to pass it on.