

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus came and said to them,

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

REFLECTION 1: COMFORT IN ASCENSION

A priest was calling on one of his parishioners who had been bed-ridden for years. In sympathy he said; ‘Mary, you must have dark days; they must be overcast with clouds sometimes’. ‘Yes Father’ answered this living saint, ‘but often I find comfort in a cloud’. ‘How is that Mary?’ asked the priest. ‘Well, when I am very low and darkness hovers over me, I turn and look through the window and if I see a heavy cloud, I think of those precious words; ‘A cloud took him out of their sight’ (Acts 1: 19). ‘I look up at that cloud and I think to myself that that may be the very cloud behind which my Saviour is found!’ Ascension is that great feast of hope and comfort.

The Ascension or return of Christ to heaven in his human and glorified body is the continuation of his work on earth – the site and seat of Jesus’ mission here below. He, the Son of God, the Second divine person of the Blessed Trinity, became man, lived and died on this planet so we could live with him forever in heaven. By his death on the cross Jesus reconciled sinful humanity with his divine Creator. So, his human death earned for us a share in the divine life. His resurrection is a guarantee that we too could rise again. His Ascension to the Father is the prelude to our entrance into God’s everlasting kingdom. The Christ who underwent the torments of Calvary is now seated in the place of honour at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He’s there as our representative and as our intercessor. His glorified wounds are extended to the Father on our behalf and ‘by his wounds we are healed’.

Jesus has gone to heaven to prepare a place for us knowing that in the Father’s house there are many dwelling places and where Jesus is we one day aspire to be. Like that elderly lady I mentioned, the Ascension is a source of joy for true believers. In baptism that seed of natural and supernatural desire to keep on living was planted within us. We know that earthly death awaits every one of us – one day our souls will be prayed for from the Dead List and future congregations will respond – ‘May he/she rest in peace’. Monuments are reminders of the fading glories of the past but our destiny is not in the decaying gravestones, but in the life of the resurrection from the dead. Many of you are parents and you seek immortality through your children and grandchildren. Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, opens the way to a new destiny for humanity. The Church is Christ’s Mystical Body through which he continues his mission as we wait for Pentecost. We pray for a renewed gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us for this mission. We have nothing to fear from our earthly death, it is the door to our eternal happiness. Are you wondering who those men in white clothing are who are mentioned in The Acts of the Apostles? I believe them to be Moses and Elijah, whom we met at the Transfiguration – figures to whom tradition accredited an ‘ascension into heaven’.

REFLECTION 2: SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND

The meaning of this feast of the Ascension cannot be found in the pages of history. And yet, what the Ascension achieves touches all our lives. We may very well ask, what actually happened on that Ascension Day? Was Jesus really lifted up? And if so, where did his body go? Both the first reading and the Gospel give a few descriptive details, but it is in the reading from Ephesians (Eph. 1: 17-23) that tells us what Jesus’ ascension signifies.

God has exalted Jesus who lived among us and was put to death because he claimed to be the Messiah of God. His being lifted up is a way of speaking and saying that Jesus enjoys the place of honour in God's presence – his transition from his resurrected existence on Earth to existence with God in heaven. Jesus has been raised above all other beings and because he has conquered death, everything else is also under his feet. Even the name of Jesus is above all other names. Though historical details are what might interest us most, they are probably the least important – the religious meaning of his exaltation is so sublime that it defies a more factual description. Astronauts have been 'up there' and although they have seen quite a bit, they have come across no resurrected body!

While today is a feast celebrating the ascension of Jesus into heaven, the readings indicate that his exaltation carries implications for our lives here on Earth. Jesus' followers are told not to stand looking up to heaven, preoccupied with what was in the past. Just before he had ascended, they had asked Jesus about the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel. He directed their attention to the future, to the coming of the Spirit and to their ministerial responsibilities that will follow his coming – 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth'. As they stand astonished, looking up to heaven, they are once again directed to the future. The two men who suddenly appear assure them that Jesus will return.

This new direction is stated more clearly in the Gospel (Matthew 28: 16-20) where the Eleven are given a commission. It is now their responsibility to continue the work Jesus began - to make disciples of all the nations, to baptise and to teach. This is an awesome task! Will they be able to accomplish it without the physical presence of Jesus? Yes! Jesus promises that they will indeed be able to accomplish this, for though he is leaving them, he will be with them always, 'until the end of the age'.

The mission of Jesus is now in our hands – it's our responsibility to make disciples of all nations, to bring the good news to the people of our age. The disciples were not alone in this task and neither are we. Jesus' words are directed to us as well: 'I am with you always, until the end of the age'.