

HOMILY ON THE FEAST OF ASCENSION-MAY 16, 2010

(ACTS 1:1-11; EPHESIANS 1:17-23; LUKE 24:46-53)lp

Today's readings describe the ascension of the Lord Jesus into his heavenly glory after promising his Holy Spirit as the source of heavenly power for his disciples and after commanding them to bear witness to him by their lives and preaching throughout the world. What is celebrated is Jesus' exaltation and the end of his earthly existence as a prelude to the gift of the Spirit. The ascended Jesus is still with us because of his promise, "*I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.*" He is with us at all times and in all places, releasing a new energy upon the earth, the energy of the Holy Spirit to preach his Good News of salvation by bearing witness to him. Hence today's feast is the celebration of Jesus' glory after his suffering and death - the glory in which we also hope to share. The Ascension and Pentecost, together, mark the beginning of the Church. The feast of the Ascension tells us that the church must be a community in mission, guided by God's Spirit and confident of God's protection even amid suffering and death. The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes the scene of Jesus' ascension and his promise of the Holy Spirit and the missionary command to bear witness to him. In the second reading, St. Paul explains the theological meaning of Jesus' exaltation. He amplifies this message by saying, "*May God enlighten the eyes of our heart so that we may know the great hope to which we have been called.*" Although risen and ascended, Jesus is still with us as his Holy Spirit in the Holy Bible, in the Holy Eucharist, in the other sacraments and in the praying community. He remains accessible to us now as a life-giving Spirit. Today's gospel tells us that, with his return to the Father, Jesus completes his mission on earth. In the descriptions of Christ after his resurrection, we are given a hint of what life will be like in heaven. But it is in his Ascension that we see him entering fully into the life and glory of God. The prospect of sharing that glory should be the driving force of our lives.

Each Sunday we profess through the Creed, "*He ascended into heaven.*" Christ's Ascension was the culmination of God's divine plan for Christ Jesus, by his return to his Father with "Mission Accomplished." Ascension is the grand finale of all his words and - works done for us and for our salvation. It was a culmination, but not the conclusion. As he is now with God in glory, he is now with us in Spirit: "*Lo, I am with you always.*"

The Ascension account: The biblical accounts of the Ascension focus not so much on the details of the event as on the mission Jesus gave to his disciples. For example, in the accounts narrated in Luke and Acts, the Ascension took place in Jerusalem . In Matthew and Mark, on the other hand, the event occurred in Galilee . All accounts, however, agree that the Ascension took place on a mountain. In Luke and Acts, the Ascension happened forty days after the Resurrection, a period during which Jesus appeared repeatedly to his followers. In Matthew and Mark there is no indication of the time period between the Resurrection and the Ascension. The gospel writers

apparently were not aiming at accuracy of historical detail but were more concerned with transmitting Our Lord's message.

The ascension message: "Preach the good news and be my witnesses:" Matthew, Mark and Acts record Jesus' last words differently: 1) "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). 2) "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). 3) "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark.16:15). All are in agreement that (a) Jesus gave his disciples a mission of bearing witness to him by preaching and living the good news. They are to tell and re-tell the story of Jesus' life, suffering, death and resurrection. (b) He assured them of the divine assistance of his Holy Spirit in the carrying out of this mission.

According to Luke, the disciples "*returned to Jerusalem with great joy.*" Apparently Jesus' exaltation and final blessing gave them, and gives us, the assurance that though absent, he is still present, present even in the pain and sorrow we undergo. That is why St. Augustine assures us, "Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, the members of his body, have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above: '*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*' and when he said: '*I was hungry and you gave me food.*' While in heaven he is also with us; and while on earth we are with him. He is here with us by his divinity, his power and his love.

Anecdote:1) There is a story told about a small town in Germany that was severely blasted during the last war. Some years later, the buildings were restored. One of the buildings was the town's cathedral. When the renovation was complete, it was noticed that a large figure of Christ the King, which stood in front of the cathedral and had had both its hands blown off in the explosion, was still unrepaired. When some people went to the parish priest to enquire if he had any plans to repair the statue, he surprised them all by saying that he was going to leave the statue exactly as it was. He explained that, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he took his body with him. He asked us to provide the body (church?), and his Spirit would provide everything else. The priest said he would not replace the hands on the statue to remind people that Jesus has no other hands but ours, when it comes to continuing the building of his kingdom here on earth - Jack McArdle in '*And that's the Gospel Truth.*'

2): Mission Accomplished: Many of us saw the banner on the aircraft carrier, Abraham Lincoln which read: *Mission Accomplished*. Only it turned out that the mission was not done, and there was a mission that was to be done. The mission would take far more than anyone had planned for or expected. The Ascension of our Lord--it is truly a day to be celebrated and honored for the mission accomplished by Jesus and for the mission he has given us to complete.