

Ascension Sunday Readings and Reflection

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11

A reading from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles:

In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with the them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”

The word of the Lord.

Responsorial: Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

All you peoples, clap your hands, shout to God with cries of gladness, For the LORD, the Most High, the awesome, is the great king over all the earth.

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

God mounts his throne amid shouts of joy; the LORD, amid trumpet blasts. Sing praise to God, sing praise; sing praise to our king, sing praise.

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

For king of all the earth is God; sing hymns of praise. God reigns over the nations, God sits upon his holy throne.

God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 1:17-23

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

Brothers and sisters: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of

glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL

+ A reading from the conclusion of the holy Gospel according to Matthew 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Ascension Sunday Reflection

As the pandemic and shut down drag on, more and more people become infected and die, many more people lose their jobs and source of income. As we all practice social distancing the more likely we are to go stir crazy. Two of today's readings tell the story of Jesus return to the father and as he leaves his people behind. I am tempted to fall into funk. It sure feels that way. Jesus is in heaven and we are all stuck here, alone at home (at least those of us who take the stay-at-home order seriously). We are left to face the pandemic with no immunity or treatment for symptoms. If we catch this disease we can transmit it to the people with whom we live, work and socialize before we know we have it. Who among us want to infect anyone else?

As we wash our hands we can pray that wisdom, consideration and compassion will prevail in our lives. We can pray for the medical researchers to develop treatments and vaccines. We can remember those who will act as guinea pigs for testing. These things can be more than a year away. What we are left with in the mean time are the mounting victims to pray for. How can the Feast of the Ascension speak with hope today?

I love the scene in Acts as the disciples continue to gaze skyward after Jesus left their sight. Two men in white ask, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" Indeed it is so easy, while alone, to brood. These reflections I give force me out of funk to seek hope. So far it works. There is an insight I have learned from doing a lot of funerals. I see the wake as an important way for people to celebrate the life of a loved one. Most people will experience the loss with grief and sadness when alone. When people gather and reminisce, there is more

laughter and joy. We are, by nature, people who need community and family. This is why social distancing is such a difficult experience for us.

The reason these reflections work for me to seek hope is rooted in this experience. I'm not writing these things just for my own benefit. It is my hope that more people than just me read these things. It can be easy for me to focus, when alone, on troubles. I can become locked into brooding. By putting these thoughts into text changes my focus from inward to outward; from self to community. Family and friends now exist in a wider circle of dispersion.

I had a similar experience in 1993. I went on Sabbatical near Dublin, Ireland for three months. Granted there were twenty or so others with me and I was part of a solid community, I was separated from all my family and friends. I began to write letters. I would write three multi-paged letters by hand each evening. I had a notebook computer and could have sent emails but I didn't bring it. In '93 there was no Wi-Fi either. I still had to use dial-up. I also made, out of home sickness, several rather expensive and long Trans Atlantic calls home. I spent in the second month \$400.00 on phone calls. That helped and kept me connected. These reflections do the same. With them I am able to see a wider picture than just the demons in my own head. What I say about faith is true. To live by faith helps us to go beyond our feelings and seek God's truth.

I hear the challenge of the two men in white speaking loudly. Their words helped to change the focus of the disciples from inward to outward. Jesus made a promise to them in the Gospel of Matthew, "Remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age." I believe Jesus. How near can Jesus be? He is closer than the six feet we now must maintain between us. He is nearer than the blood coursing through our bodies. Jesus is part of each of us and we are part of Jesus. We may not be able to receive communion now but remember; Jesus became part of us when we were baptized. Communion, as a sacrament is an outward sign of the inward truth. We already have Jesus and he will not leave.

We, as Catholics, have all kinds of baggage we carry. Piety, theology, tradition, morality, liturgy and devotion are to lead us to Jesus. Sometimes that stuff can get in the way. We can forget that Jesus never leaves each one of us. We feel lonely, unworthy and lost. The gospel is the good news. God loved each of us so much that he sent Jesus to save us. When Jesus died, he had each of us in mind. We can never lose God's unconditional and personal love. The very thought of Jesus can be a glimpse into the power of God's mystery. We all have such thoughts of Jesus.

Jesus went to the Father but Jesus remained as well. First the disciples and later the Church became the Body of Christ. We've heard and said this many times. Do we ever try to unpack what that means? We all know the "Our Father." We know it by rote and some of us know it in more than one language. We never pay much attention to the words because our brains go on automatic when we recite the prayer. Sit down and read it and pay attention to the meaning of the words. It is a powerful prayer. To say that we are all members of the Body of Christ can work the same way. Not only do we bring Christ into the world, as the Church we are Jesus in the world. When we gather together for mass, we first become the living stones that make the Church before we receive Jesus. Receiving Jesus is the outward sign of who we really are, Jesus. This is the impact of Jesus' return to the Father and his promise of presence until he returns.

The Church began to grow and still grows in this sense. Jesus remains, resurrected and ascended within us and we, through baptism stand resurrected with him. Having faith, Jesus, the father and we are one through, with and in the Holy Spirit.

In the letter to the Ephesians Jesus says, "The Father put all things beneath Jesus' feet and gave Jesus as head over all things to the church." Here we are in the world and in the midst of a pandemic. We are physically parted; prevented from participating mass and gathering. We are still linked through Jesus' promise in the Spirit. Some things handed over are pleasant and good. Others are painful and provide challenge. Others have brought scandal. Yet in all this remains the promise of Jesus. When we remember what Jesus has done and when we remember one another we live what it means to be Jesus' Body. We remain, even in our separation, Christ's Church.

I am sure that as Jesus' disappeared from the disciple's view, they were filled with painful thoughts. Jesus was gone; they would never see his face, hear his voice or feel his touch in the same way again. Anyone who's lost a loved one knows what that feeling is like. They took the first steps from that experience and the Church has not yet stopped. COVID 19 has done much the same thing to us. Our lives have changed, drastically. How our lives have changed is not quite clear and may not be able to return to some semblance of normality until there is an effective treatment and viable vaccine. We, like the disciples, take the first steps in a direction we cannot see, yet.

As I wrap this reflection up, the theme of separation is real. The disciples found themselves separated from Jesus for the first time since he met them. They were alone but his promise said otherwise. He promised to be with them until the end of the age. Yet, he was gone. We, in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic are separated from one another and our normal way of living. We face, as did the disciples, an uncertain, possibly dangerous future. They adapted and were successful. We are witnesses to that fact. Our presence as the Body of Christ is testimony to the truth of Jesus' promise. We adapt and hope for success. The promise of Jesus still works.

There is another theme as well, transformation. The Acts of the Apostles reflects the past. We live in the present. In order for this to be the present we all have a past too. We are fruits of Jesus' promise. The disciples became apostles; the followers became missionaries. They carried the gospel of Jesus through the generations to us. Our faith is founded on theirs. Their transformation becomes the pattern for our transformation. We have seen who the disciples became. They became the Church. We are the Church now. Who we will become is a work in process. As they were guided by Jesus' promise, so are we.

As the pandemic continues we can pray for one another. We can pray for those afflicted. We can pray for the dead and those who mourn them. We can pray for those on the front line who keep us with food, those on the front line to serve and protect. We can do our part as we keep apart.

May God keep us in his loving embrace.

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