

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 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

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians 1:17-23

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: Mark 16:15-20

+ A reading from the conclusion of the holy Gospel according to Mark:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Ascension of Jesus

There are inferences we make from the terms we use. Ascension implies going up. We ascend the stairs. We ascend to the mountain top. As Catholics, we ascend to truth. In other words, we go to higher ground, a higher place or a higher state of mind and being. We can infer that, as we can always become better people, we can ascend in character. We assume that Heaven, the abode of God, is up. Where it's true that the sky is up, from our earthly perspective, and another word for the sky is the heavens, Heaven is not the sky and is not in outer space. We have an image of Jesus' ascension as being lifted up on a cloud to Heaven from today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus returned to the Father and the disciples saw him no more. That is the message of the scriptures with out special effects. Yet despite not seeing him, the Church continued to know and experience Jesus' presence. God truly lives within us. God is part of every element of creation too. God is not far off but near and intimate. All we need to do to notice is to look. We are always in God's presence.

We also have a notion of heaven as a place of reward for having lived a life of doing good and avoiding evil. Heaven is not a place. Our vision of a place of paradise and reward is misleading. Jesus spoke of paradise as he died on the cross. To the criminal who died on a cross at the same time as Jesus and who professed faith in him Jesus said, "This day you will be with me in paradise." Mostly, Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, not heaven, is our goal. Eternal rest is not our goal either. Our goal is resurrection when Jesus returns to complete God's Kingdom at the end of time.

In the gospel of John, Jesus spoke of the oneness of the Father and him. He spoke of returning to the Father. After the Ascension, no one ever saw Jesus again. We experience the presence of Jesus in a spiritual way. We know Jesus' presence when we gather in his name and when we break bread. Jesus didn't promise us Heaven. He promised eternal life. After we die we live forever with God. What that actually is we cannot know. Jesus, in his parables, tells us what the Kingdom of God is like while never defining it. Jesus prayed that one day we will be one as the Father and he are one. Eternal life is becoming one with God.

The images we have of what eternal life with God can be have their limits. They are images that we produce and our ability to imagine has limits. There are no limits to God. I remember, as a kid, being taught about the Beatific Vision when we see God face to face for all eternity. An image came to my mind. That image has stuck there. I saw millions of people sitting on folding chairs staring at the divine light that streamed from God's face for all eternity, motionless and enrapt. At the same time I also had another thought. Even as a kid, sitting on a folding chair for just an hour could become quite uncomfortable, if not painful. What would eternity be like? Could this be a vision of hell and lasting torment?

I returned to scripture and revisited Jesus' words. We all have moments when we find ourselves thinking about God. The thought of God just pops into our minds, unbidden. It can happen while stuck in traffic,

taking a shower, witnessing a beautiful day or when we are with those we love. What are those moments like? They can be as wondrous as they are fleeting. They can be glimpses into eternity and into God. They may last but a moment and occur unbidden, but those are times when God comes to us. They are gifted, graced moments. They are holy because God is near. Eternal life is not heaven, a place. Eternal life is living in God. We live in God now and God lives in us. Instead of a momentary glimpse, we become one with God. Just as Jesus returned to the Father, so will we. God is love.

I have always been struck by the question asked of the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stare at the sky? Jesus will return." Jesus has not, as of yet, returned. The question prodded them to move forward. That they did. We believe as a result. The presence of Jesus never left. There was, and now is, movement. It is not up, though. It is forward in actions and in time. It is toward God and God toward us. It is our movement together. These final words of Jesus end the gospel of Matthew. There is no mention of any special effects, just these words. "Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. I will be with you always, to the end of time." With these words the disciple's mission began. Their mission is now the mission of the Church and our mission. The Spirit has moved deeply into us as we offer witness to each other and to the rest of the world.

The words in Mark, to survive deadly poison, venomous snakes and healing the sick may be what we want to witness, especially amid a deadly pandemic. Jesus returning on a cloud and surrounded by a singing chorus of angels might be what we want to witness. What has God given? What do we have? Salvation. Face masks, social distance, hand washing and, now, vaccines are the means healing comes. Could this be what Jesus actually meant? Have we uncovered the un-varnished truth of Jesus words? God accomplishes his plans and works through us? I maintain that this is precisely what Jesus meant. The real miracle and witness to Jesus' continued presence is that we believe and constitute, together, the Mystical Body of Christ which is Jesus' Church. What we expect to see can prevent us from seeing who we are and what we have. We belong to Christ and act in his name. We see through eyes of faith. Knowing Jesus' presence gives us hope and strength. God's love forgives our failure. In this, Jesus assures us that his Kingdom will come in his time and not ours.

May we always know Jesus' Spirit moving us forward to the Kingdom of God.

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