

May 21 VII Sunday of Easter, Ascension of Our Lord

Today's readings describe the Ascension of the Lord Jesus into Heavenly glory, after promising to send the Holy Spirit as the source of Heavenly power for the apostles and commanding them to bear witness to him through their lives and preaching throughout the world. What we celebrate today 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" (Mt 28:20). He is with us at all times and in all places, releasing a new energy upon the earth, the energy of the Holy Spirit Who enables us to preach the Good News of salvation and to bear witness to Jesus in keeping and living out his word. 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 the Holy Spirit and confident of God's protection even amid suffering and in the face of death. Today's liturgy communicates the Ascension's significance for us: "he ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following where he, our Head and Founder, has gone before" (Preface I of the Ascension of the Lord).

The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, presents the scene of Jesus' Ascension, the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' instructions to the apostles to wait in Jerusalem for the Power from above, and missionary command to the apostles to bear witness to him. In the second reading, Paul teaches us that God revealed His might in the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ and in exalting Him over all angelic forces. Jesus remains accessible to us now in the life-giving Holy Spirit, assuring us that one day we, too, will be ascending to Heavenly glory, provided that, with His grace, we live out our Faith in Him through the mission of loving service He entrusts to us. Today's Gospel tells us that, with his return to the Father, Jesus completes his mission on earth. But just before his Ascension, Jesus entrusted to the disciples the mission of preaching the Good News and evangelizing the whole world by bearing witness to him through their lives. It is in his Ascension that we see Jesus entering fully into the life and glory of God. In the descriptions of Christ after his Resurrection, we are given a hint of what life will be like in Heaven. The prospect of sharing that glory should be the driving force of our lives.

The Ascension message is: "Preach the Good News and be my witnesses". Matthew, Mark and Acts record Jesus' last words differently. But all are in agreement that (a) Jesus gave the disciples a mission of bearing witness to everyone 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 the Holy Spirit in the carrying out of this mission. (c) He instructed them to baptize the believers: "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." (Mt 16:19-20).

1) We need to be proclaimers and evangelizers: To be a Christian is to be a proclaimer and an evangelizer. There is a difference between preaching and proclaiming. We preach with words, but we proclaim with our lives. Let us ask the guidance of the Spirit of God to bear witness to Jesus by our transparent Christian lives.

3) We have a teaching mission: Jesus taught us lessons of Faith, Hope, forgiveness, mercy, redemption, and Love. We cannot put these lessons on a shelf and ignore them. They stand before us in the person of Jesus. Although no longer visibly present in the world, Jesus is present in his words, and we must make these words real in our lives as well as in the lives of others. Christianity was meant to be a Faith in which Jesus' followers would help and care for others, just as Jesus had done. But the spreading of the Good News to all nations is not a goal that can be attained by human might and craft. This is why Jesus promises to empower the Church with His abiding presence and that of the Holy Spirit. The challenge of sharing the Good News with all mankind should, therefore, begin with our admission that we have often been arrogant and overbearing. We must learn to be humble and let the Holy Spirit lead the way.

3) We need Jesus as our source of strength and encouragement in doing His will: We will be able to overcome doubts about our Faith, as well as baseless fears, anxieties, and worries, by meditating on Jesus' Ascension and the lesson it teaches -- that we, too, are called to share his glory in Heaven.