Homily of the Seventh Sunday of Easter of Year A (The Ascension of the Lord)

The followers of Jesus had always thought that he was a political messiah. That was why James and John requested Jesus "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left" (Mark 11:37). The two disciples of Jesus on their way to Emmaus in utter disappointment said to the 'stranger,' "But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). When he was about to ascend to heaven, their thoughts still had not changed. We see in the first reading: "When they had gathered together they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus answered by promising them the Holy Spirit who will give them the spiritual authority that will enable them to become witnesses. "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." The gift of the Holy Spirit is greater than any political position and political freedom. Ascension of Jesus into heaven took place after forty days of Jesus' resurrection. What should we have in mind as we celebrate the Ascension? What does the celebration mean to us?

First, Jesus is no longer physically present in the world. He told his disciples to take his place and become witnesses of him to the ends of the earth. Jesus has given us the same assignment as we are now his disciples and his representatives in the world. We are to continue the good works of Jesus. St. Teresa of Avila puts it this way: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Second, Jesus ascended into heaven, and is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us (Romans 8:34). The Book of Hebrews assures us, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help" (Hebrews 4:15-16). Our prayer life and faith are empowered and sustained by these biblical assurances that Jesus is interceding for us. He promises in the Gospel, "And behold, I am with you [in Spirit] always, until the end of the age."

Third, Ascension means that we have hope of eternal dwelling. Jesus assures us, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be" (John 14:1-4). The world is nobody's permanent home. We are all pilgrims on a journey to our eternal dwelling place where Jesus has prepared for us. We are therefore encouraged, while on this journey, to live life that will lead us to the eternal dwelling place.

We celebrate Ascension with joyful longing for the celebration of the Pentecost. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles returned to Jerusalem, went to the upper room and devoted themselves with one accord to prayer. We are to do the same. We are invited to engage in novena prayers to the Holy Spirit as we await a renewed experience of the descent of the Holy Spirit.

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