

Homily of Ascension of the Lord Year B, 2021

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47:2-9; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

The idea that Jesus was a political messiah never left Jesus' disciples even when Jesus was about to ascend into heaven. Jesus' disciples gave him a heroic welcome into Jerusalem believing that he had come to overthrow the Romans. Then, he was arrested, crucified and buried. When Jesus reappeared, the disciples' conviction of his political messiahship became stronger. We read in the first reading, "When they had gathered together they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?'" I guess that Jesus' answer astonished them further. Jesus replied to 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." The disciples might have wondered, "What's this man talking about? We are talking about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, and he is talking about the Father and the Holy Spirit and witnessing. What's the connection?" Probably, that was why when Jesus disappeared into the cloud, the apostles stood in bewilderment and gazed intently at the sky until the angels came to minister to them. Then, they returned to Jerusalem and "went to the upper room ... [and] devoted themselves with one accord to prayer..." until the descent of the Holy Spirit on them (Acts 1:12-14).

What does the Ascension of the Lord mean to us?

First, Jesus ascended into heaven and is at the right hand of God interceding for us. St. Paul confirms this, "Who will dare condemn them? Christ who died, and better still, rose and is seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us?" Jesus himself says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The Book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus, "Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Also, 1 John 2:1, "We have an intercessor with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Just One."

Second, Jesus says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am" (John 14:3). The two angels who appeared to the disciples when Jesus ascended into heaven said to the disciples, "This Jesus has been taken up into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven." The Preface of Ascension 1 of today's Eucharistic celebration says, "Mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of hosts, 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." We are, therefore, to be ready for his return, and go with him. The Lord speaks of his coming in the Book of Revelations, "Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed" (Revelations 16:15).

Third, Jesus is no longer physically in the world. As his followers, we are to continue his good deeds by witnessing him to the world. Jesus remains in the world through us who are his disciples, ambassadors, and witnesses. We are mirrors of Christ. We are his mouth, his hands, his feet, and his heart. St. Teresa of Avila appeals to us: "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."

Fourth, when Jesus ascended into heaven the apostles went to the upper room and devoted themselves with one accord to prayer until the descent of the Holy Spirit on them. We are invited to go into "upper room" of prayer, and pray for the renewal and fire of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises us, "I will send him to you" (John 16:7). St. Paul prays for us in the second reading, "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, ..." (Ephesians 1:17-19).

Finally, in today's gospel reading, before his ascension, Jesus reveals "the hope that belongs to his call" and the effects of the power of the Holy Spirit. The receivers of his call and the Holy Spirit will go out and proclaim the gospel. Signs will accompany them: 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 (Mark 16:17-18).

May we not remain looking at the sky but go into "upper room" of prayer and receive our call and "the surpassing greatness of his power." Amen.

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