

Homily of Ascension of the Lord Year A, 2023
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. In the first reading, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" I imagine that Jesus' answer was confusing to them. Jesus replied, "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" (Acts 1:6-7). The disciples might have wondered, "We are talking about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, and he is talking about the Father and the Holy Spirit. What is the connection?" It could be why when Jesus disappeared into the cloud, the apostles stood in bewilderment and gazed intently at the sky until two angels came to minister to them. Then, they returned to Jerusalem and remained together and gave themselves to constant prayer until they received the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised 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, "Christ who died, and ... rose and is seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us?" Jesus 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 writes, "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 says, "We have an intercessor with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Just One." This is the reason all our prayers are to God, in the Holy Spirit, and through Jesus Christ.

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 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. Jesus speaks of his coming in Matthew 24:36, "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

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. He says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Jesus remains in the world through us, who are his disciples, ambassadors, and witnesses. We are his mouth, his hands, his feet, and his heart.

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.

(Teresa of Avila)

Fourth, as we celebrate Jesus' Ascension, we pray and look forward to the fulfillment of Jesus' promises. He says, "But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Jesus also says, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name; he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you" (John 14:26). I pray that I may open my heart to the working of the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, St. Augustine describes the mystical nature of Ascension in today's Office of Reading: "He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven. The fact that he was in heaven even while he was on earth is borne out by his own statement: 'No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.' These words are explained by our oneness with Christ, for he is our head and we are his body."

Although Jesus is not physically with us, we trust his assurances to us. Last Sunday, he assured us, "I will not leave you orphans" (John 14:18). In today's gospel, he assures, "Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

We pray: O Lord, look beyond our inadequacies and unworthiness. Mark not our sins; but manifest your divine presence among us who place all our hope in you. Amen.

Let us lift the Lord's name high with the song by Rick Founds:

Lord I lift Your name on high
Lord I love to sing Your praises
I'm so glad You're in my life
I'm so glad You came to save us

You came from heaven to earth to show the way
From the earth to the cross, my debt to pay
From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky
Lord I lift Your name on high

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP