

Cycle B Ascension of the Lord

Reading 1, Acts 1:1-11

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 the 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."

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9

R. (6) 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.

R. 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.

R. 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.

R. God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

Reading II, Eph 4:1-13

Brothers and sisters, I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace; one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature to manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ.

Gospel, Mk 16:15-20

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 Ascension of the Lord sheds some important light on the mystery of God's love and His intimate relationship with us. It was an event in the life of Jesus and the early church...and, today it is a feast day for Christians, it is a theology and a spirituality. It is all woven together into one big bundle of mystery that we too seldom try to unpack and sort out. Today let's see if we can better understand what the Ascension means.

Just outside Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives you can see the Chapel of the Ascension. It has been a holy site dating back before 390AD marking the place where Jesus ascended into heaven. There is an indentation of a right foot in the rock on the floor under the main chapel dome that is said to be the footprint of Jesus. Today we celebrate Jesus' disappearance from our midst. In awe the Disciples saw that He ascended and was seen no more. Did He complete His work on earth and then went home to the Father? This explanation does not seem quite right, because the Jesus has never been absent. God is everywhere. Is the Ascension a mystery we can understand?

Perhaps it would be better to think of the disappearance of Jesus as part of our homecoming, not His. The disciples had been at home with Jesus. They had shared his company, ate and drank with him, walked with him to Jerusalem, witnessed his death and Resurrection, and spent time with the Risen Christ for 40 days. He had been their companion, the center of their community.

But Jesus had to disappear if they were to be not only be with him...but were to be in Him. With the Ascension and Pentecost, Jesus was transformed from being someone the Disciples were just with. Instead, with the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus became their home. They used to be with his body. Now they became His body, as we today are the Body of Christ. Strange as it may seem, we had to lose Him, if we were to

discover this new intimate relationship of being in Him and He in us.

St. Augustine may help us understand the mystery of the Ascension this way. He often stressed a very unique quality of the Eucharistic food that we receive during Mass. Ordinary food we eat daily at meal times, he said, becomes part of us. We are what we eat. That's why health foods are so popular today. But the Eucharist, he continued, is different. It is unique in that we become part of it. We become more Christ-like, more patient and kind, more forgiving and understanding. We still live our ordinary daily lives, but it is Christ who inspires our motives, attitudes and actions. We begin to see people and events through His eyes...to think as He does. When Jesus was on earth, he used his own human hands to reach out to people, but when he wants to feed the poor today, he uses our hands to do this. As St. Theresa said, "Jesus has no hands today but yours and mine to lend the needy a helping hand; no feet but yours and mine to approach others, to visit the sick; no heart but yours and mine to care for others, to be kind to others, to love and forgive them."

During the consecration, Jesus says to us "This is my body, given up for you." The most appropriate response, I think, is for us to say, "And this Lord is my body that I give up for you." We are the Body of Christ, the extension of Christ, the presence of Jesus in the modern world...His hands and feet and heart.

St Augustine famously said that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Is it starting to make sense?

So like the Disciples, we can rejoice today at the disappearance of Jesus. It is all part of our coming home to God...of God making his home in us.

Our one, Holy, catholic and Apostolic Church is a sign to the world of our home in God....But, the apostles who witnessed the disappearing of Jesus took time to realize that the God who wanted to have only Jews in His community never existed. The Gentiles also were in Him. ...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...

We are all still learning.

You see, while the current Chapel of the Ascension building in Jerusalem was originally reconstructed by the Crusaders, it has in fact been owned by the Muslims since the year 1198AD. Originally converted to a mosque, it was never used because most of the visitors were Christian pilgrims. As a sign of compromise and goodwill, a 2nd mosque was built next to the chapel so the site could be shared as a holy place for Christians and Muslims, as it has been for over 800 years. Some say this place is a sign of God's great love for us...for all of us.

I think I am starting to understand the mystery of the Ascension.