

A Reflection on the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord.

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The Ascension of the Lord is understood in Scripture as the completion of the Resurrection, this is especially true for St. John in his Gospel. However, it is figuratively and dramatically described in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles.

Significantly the disciples are instructed not to spend too much time lingering over the questions of HOW or WHY ?

Just before Jesus' ascension, the disciples voiced an understandable concern: 'Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' At one level we have here the last flicker of the hope that Jesus might be a Messiah along the lines of more conventional messianic expectation.

If the truth be stated the apostles were far from being clear as to what they were called to do. –

They were now the eleven; they bowed down- though some hesitated. Their fragility is evident even at this point. Also present is a strong sense of 'unfinished business'. Jesus may be the Messiah, but neither then,- now,- nor in the foreseeable future do the times and conditions look very much like the 'messianic era' described elsewhere in Scripture. The same old world, the same old patterns of violence, suffering and death. Those were the challenges, and they remain the challenges; this is the world into which the Kingdom of God has to be brought.

Jesus is no longer visually or tangibly present to His disciples but based on what He has promised - this does not mean an abandonment of either the disciples or his saving mission in the world.

Jesus gives His word that through the Spirit he will be present and active in a new way.

The disciples had sensed something of the power of the Spirit through their association with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry.

The Preface of the Mass for this Feast sums up magnificently the message :

"For the Lord Jesus, the King of glory,
conqueror of sin and death,
ascended (today) to the highest heavens.
Mediator between God and us ,
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."

Frequently as funerals I point out that both our God given destiny and the aspirations of our human hearts are inter-related.

The common and universal aspiration of every rational human being is for HAPPINESS and FULFILMENT.....

For many who get on the wrong track this quest for happiness and desire for fulfilment- can be so elusive as to be destructive.

This thirst and desire for happiness and fulfilment is well captured in some familiar sayings:

◆ *"Our hearts were made for you O Lord and they will never rest until they rest in you."* (St. Augustine).

◆ *"The eye hasn't seen, nor did the ear hear, it hasn't even entered the human heart what God has prepared for those who love Him."* (St Paul)

◆ *"We are now the children of God, but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed,... When it is revealed we shall see Him as He really is.."* (St John)

The Ascension pertains to Divine revelation and is an assurance of the destiny which the Love of God desires and wills for each human being.

The Disciples had a commitment to Jesus based on the physical Person they saw, heard, and touched - the visual...the physical Presence of the Lord.

We too crave for tangible, visual certitude. But discipleship to-day has taken on another dimension. We are now in an era of commitment in faith, in trust, and in hope. Jesus speaks reassuringly of His ongoing Presence..."I will be with you all days until the end of time."

Pope Leo the Great (5th cent.) has left us a magnificent expression of the significance of the Feast. He wrote:

"What was visible in Christ has now passed over into the Sacraments of the Church. And so that faith might be more noble and strong, it is now grounded not on sight but doctrine..."

This is a Feast of Mission; the Disciples are commissioned and exhorted to Go and Witness to the Lord's death and Resurrection and indeed to the Gospel message He personally preached.

The atmosphere is one of reassurance of His abiding Presence.

God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is not distant to our lives or heedless to our needs; we believe in a Companion-God, who seeks our company as much as we need his. We certainly need such assurance at present with a world enshrouded in the Covid virus.

The Ascension of the Lord is the great coming together of Heaven and earth – the Word who became flesh has ascended.

The Church now has to be the vehicle by which this process is continued... "you will receive power". Something of earth has been enveloped by Heaven.

The Ascension is an opportunity to reflect on the very mission of the Church and indeed our own destiny. St. Paul prays that our minds might be enlightened so that we might appreciate the destiny to which God is calling us in Jesus Christ.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray "May your Kingdom come.. may your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven"-- may the ways of Heaven permeate the earth...

Let us hear again Christ's call to each of us to move away from the complacency and comfort zone of a church – using as best we can the opportunities to take the message of the Gospel to the world of our time.

And let us rejoice in Christ's presence – for He is indeed our Emmanuel – God with us.