

Ascension of the Lord

May 12, 2024

My dear people of God, today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension and so our readings describe the Ascension of the Lord Jesus into his Heavenly glory. This was after promising his disciples of the Holy Spirit as their source of Heavenly power and commanding them to bear witness to him throughout the world by their lives and preaching. But the ascended Jesus is still with us through his indwelling Holy Spirit as he has promised, "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." Today's feast is a celebration of Jesus' final glorification after his suffering, death, and Resurrection – a glory in which we, too, hope to share.

The first reading gives an account of the event of the Ascension as recorded in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. First, Jesus instructed his apostles to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the baptism by the Holy Spirit so that they might become his "witnesses to the ends of the earth" by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then a cloud took Jesus from their sight and two Heavenly messengers in white garments gave them the assurance of Jesus' "second coming" or return in glory.

The Gospel describes how Jesus ascended to Heaven after giving his final blessing and missionary command to his disciples. The mandate was to "proclaim the Good News to the whole creation," "to be his witnesses," and "to make disciples of all nations."

As we might be aware, in sports, critical moment in a relay race is the passing of the baton from one runner to another. More relays are won or lost at that moment than at any other. The feast of the Ascension might be compared to the passing of the baton in a relay race.

Today we gather as a Church to celebrate the day on which Jesus returned to his rightful place with his Father in heaven. It had been about three years - a LONG three years, as Jesus embraced his mission fully, embraced the plan God had for him. Three years of teaching and preaching and healing and performing miracles, all in the hope that those

who saw him or met him or listened to him or heard about him would be moved - moved to believe in him and his promises. Jesus was calling them to be more, that is, love more and give more and forgive more. Jesus was in a very real sense calling them to a new kind of life, a life in which they would act and speak and see in ways they hadn't before. Three long years, culminating in a cup that Jesus prayed would pass him by; a cup of suffering and death.

But that was not the end. Jesus was not gone from this world. He was alive, raised to a glorious life in which sin and death had no more power over him. He had conquered those things once and for all. And he wanted his friends to know of that deep and profound truth. And so he appeared to them and others over a period of about six weeks, enabling them to believe the "unbelievable", even getting some (such as Thomas) to recognize him as both Lord and God. What a story! The greatest story ever told. But the story wasn't (and isn't) over.

It was time for a new chapter, a new phase, a new period in the unfolding of God's plan for the world. Jesus would "leave" this world in a physical sense, and that would require that he hand over something precious, something of great importance. Jesus would "leave" his disciples, but before doing that, he would "pass the baton," entrust his mission and the Gospel message to those who believed in him and trusted and hoped in his promises. His work would now become the work of "ordinary" men and women, Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, and all the rest and incredibly, that means you and me too. The time to look up to Jesus' physical presence to do everything is over and gone.

As I reflected on what to say this day, the image of a track meet or passing the baton came to mind. In a certain sense, living faithfully (and in a particular way, living as a disciple of Jesus) is sort of like running a race, trying to stay on the right path and continue on the journey God has laid out for us. This analogy of passing a baton is not something I came up with of course. Many have used this sort of imagery (especially St. Paul who saw his life in Jesus in just this same way). And as with all analogies,

it works in some ways and falls short in others. But I do think it can help us as we consider what we are celebrating this day.

The image of faith as a journey, as moving down a path chosen by God, is probably not new to you. Many people of faith often talk that way. Faith is all about moving on in a particular direction, toward a particular destination, toward our God who is drawing us to himself. We even talk about “stepping out” in faith. But a race? A race implies a competition. And if that’s the case, what or who are we competing against? Or maybe more precisely what exactly are we “competing” for?

We’re competing so that hope wins out over despair. We’re competing so that generosity wins out over greed. We’re competing so that mercy wins out over vengeance, kindness over cruelty, compassion over judgment, love over hatred, life over death in all its forms.

In a very real sense, the race we are running each step, each yard, each lap, brings the world a little closer to being the beautiful, loving, caring place God created it to be. And make no mistake about it, God doesn’t have to do it this way. He “needs” nothing from us, and therefore could choose to do it solely on his own if he wanted. But instead he chooses not to, chooses to invite us to work with him not as some kind of burden he places on us, but as a precious gift - a gift in which we get to play an essential part, run an essential leg in the transformation of the world. This is no ordinary race. It is a sacred one.

But it’s also one we don’t have to run alone. It’s a relay race we run with others and God. You see, each time we come here and sit in these pews, each time we quiet ourselves in prayer, each time we open our hearts up to the God who wants to fill us with all good things, we are in a sense being handed the baton of faith, over and over and over again.

And, as you well know, our unique role in this race is not forever. And so, it’s up to you and me to make sure we do all we can to lovingly hand the baton to others, to our brothers and sisters, to our friends and co-workers,

to our spouses and children and grandchildren. And there's really no time to lose. In fact the "race" began a long time ago. On your mark