

Homily

Ascension Sunday

May 16/17, 2015

READINGS:

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 4:1-13

Mark 16: 15-20

The Christian community's experience of the Resurrection is so profound that we continue to meditate on this great mystery for fifty days. Today's Feast of the Ascension and next week's Feast of Pentecost are really a continuation of Easter, the celebration of the great Paschal mystery. On this Sunday we are coming to the end of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. We are shifting from experiencing the Risen Lord among us in His resurrected and transformed human body to experiencing Jesus in and through the Spirit. The Spirit comes to us through Jesus, the anointed one, Jesus the Christ.

There are several key messages from our readings that we need to reflect on. 1) “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1); 2) “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?..” (Acts); “be my witnesses in Jerusalem..and to the ends of the earth...”(Acts); and finally, ..”The Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.” (Acts).

“You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Yesterday morning we celebrated the confirmation of 39 of our young people. It was a beautiful and spirit-filled liturgy. The liturgy we celebrated made us deeply aware of the connection between Jesus the Christ, i.e. Jesus the one upon whom the Holy Spirit descended and remained(“This is my beloved Son, Listen to Him”) and the Spirit coming to each one of us through our baptisms and confirmation. If Jesus is the vine and we the branches, then Jesus upon whom rests the Holy Spirit, connects us with the Spirit. “You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” and receive the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and awe and wonder at our bountiful, loving God. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the fruits of this baptism with the Holy Spirit, “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love..”

In all of the great artistic expressions of the Ascension, the artists depict the apostles looking up to the heavens. But really the message of this great Feast is not ‘look up at the skies’ but rather ‘look around you’. Look at the world you live in and “be my witnesses in Jerusalem..to the ends of the earth.” That is our commission. The Spirit we have received is such a powerful force, such a nuclear explosion, that we have to spread it throughout the world: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

What is this good news ? The good news is Jesus Himself who by taking on our human form has dignified it and made it worthy to one day enter into the mystery of God, to enter into eternal life, body and soul. God’s revelation is a man, Jesus. Jesus took on our humanity in the incarnation and raised it to an unimaginable level. Karl Rahner in his homily for the Ascension puts it this way:

“This nature of ours the Son has assumed, and he has taken it with him. He has taken it to a place where we might have thought that nature must completely dissolve into nothingness, if it wants to venture the step across

the beyond. He has taken it to the only place where it can be, if it is not to find its hell right here. I need no fashionable explanation or demythologizing to know that I cannot imagine human nature's behavior 'there' or what it does 'there.' I am not so spiritualistic that I find it easier to imagine a 'soul' there than a body."

The Spirit renews the world and returns it to the Father as a new creation, the creation God always intended for us. When we look at the world in the sense of the 'secular world' around us we can adopt three possible stances: 1) we can withdraw entirely from modern culture and not engage with it—this was the response of the monastic movement; or 2) retreat into a Christian utopia separated from modern culture or 3) immerse ourselves in our modern world but be the leaven which will transform it. We are not to run away from the world we live in but seek to change it by the way in which we live our lives. We must live with faith, and hope, and most importantly love. How will the people we encounter best learn about Jesus? The answer is contained in the conclusion to our Gospel, "the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it." The signs that speak the loudest in today's world are lives

lived with great love. This love is particularly manifest when we care for the poor, the lonely, the forgotten. It is present when we speak out against injustice. It is present when we defend the right to life of the innocent fetus or the elderly person or the disabled people among us. A. P. Stanley puts it well:

“What is meant by our neighbour we cannot doubt; it is everyone with whom, we are brought into contact. First of all, he or she is literally our neighbour who is next to us in our own family and household; husband to wife, wife to husband, parent to child, brother to sister, master to servant, servant to master. Then it is he who is close to us in our own neighbourhood, in our own town, in our own parish, in our own street. With these all true charity begins. To love and be kind to these is the very beginning of all true religion. But, besides these, as our Lord teaches, it is every one who is thrown across our path by the changes and chances of life; he or she, whosoever it shall be, whom we have any means of helping—the unfortunate stranger whom we may meet in

traveling, the deserted friend whom no one else cares to look after.”

In our multicultural, pluralistic society we must look beyond the definitions of race, other religions (Muslim, Jew, agnostic, pagan) to the common humanity all of us on this planet share for it is that humanity that Jesus assumed and it is that humanity he saved. Mark says that when we proclaim this Good News the *“Lord will work with us and confirm the message by the signs that accompany it.”* Those signs that justify our proclamation are found in the manner in which we live. Our first and most important duty as followers of Jesus is what Paul teaches us in his letter to the Ephesians today: *“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”* If we do that, we can trust that Jesus’ Spirit whom He left with us will accomplish God’s will for all creation. I will conclude with the words of Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel*,

“All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives....Our falling

short of perfection should be no excuse....The witness of faith that each Christian is called to offer leads us to say with St. Paul, "Not that I have already obtained this, or am already perfect; but I press on...because Christ Jesus has made me his own."(Phil 3:12-13)

-Pope Francis, Joy of the Gospel, #121