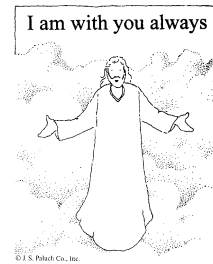


FEAST OF THE ASCENSION 2008

MAY 4, 2008 FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:1-11

EPHESIANS 1:17-23 MATTHEW 28:16-20



Like the other major feasts of our Catholic calendar, the Ascension which we celebrate today has accrued a variety of customs, many of which naturally grow out of the feast throughout the two thousand years since Christ returned to the Father. For centuries in some Italian churches, and I suspect that might still find it today, after the reading of the Gospel a statue of Christ standing on a platform attached to a system of pulleys would lift the statue into the upper reaches of the Church until it passed out of sight. Often, in Germany and England, the Ascension was accompanied by picnics in the countryside, following the Apostles as they left the city to go to the mountain with Christ. Understandably the food of the day was fowl, who with their wings could like Jesus fly out of sight; such fowl was often accompanied by pastries made in the shape of birds, and washed down with some “Ascension” beer or ale with, I guess, the intention of keeping the celebrants less earth bound. All of this often happened after great processions throughout the streets of the village or city with banners and music, and dancing. Liturgically perhaps the most impressive custom was the extinguishing of the Paschal Candle with its smoke then rising to the heavens. In recent years it has been the custom to keep the candle lit until Pentecost, and while there is reason for both customs, the extinguishing of the candle on this day has real symbolic value emphasizing the loss of Christ’s physical presence.

Regardless of what the customs have been, the Lord’s Ascension is a kind of two-sided feast. By that I simply mean that, while it celebrates the return of Christ to the Father’s right hand, it also celebrates the fact that the Apostles and disciples, those early believers, did not ascend with Him, but they remained here earth bound, but earth bound with a mission.

The image which our First Reading from *Acts* leaves with us, is this group of Apostles and disciples with gaping mouths and shocked eyes as they look into the sky and see the last vestiges of the risen Christ disappear into the heavens. The two young men in white that suddenly appear ask them, “*Why are you standing there looking up at the sky?*” and add, “*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.*” All of this is of course preface to the Acts that is actions of the Apostles in Luke’s second book. Returning to Jerusalem they devote themselves to prayer,

and elected Judas' successor, Matthias. And after completing what seems to be the first Novena, they are ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

While no more is said of these nine days, they are incredibly important to the Apostles and disciples and for us as their living extensions today. In Matthew's version of the Ascension, Jesus does not leave the earth without first giving the great commission, "*All power in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, until the end of the age.*" Now imagine if you can, that you are one of the eleven apostles. You've spent three years or so with the earthly Jesus as he taught, and cured, and fed, and forgiven men, women, and children all over Palestine, He has sent you out on little evangelization missions and you've had some success. He has been crucified by the Roman authorities in conjunction with some of the Jewish leaders, and He has risen from the dead and spent the last forty days or so helping you to understand all that He tried to teach you in the preceding three. Now He's gone, and you are left with a group of ten other fishermen, tax collectors, zealots and others. You've been no further south than Jerusalem and no further north than the Decapolis region of Galilee, and now you, the eleven of you have been told to make disciples of all nations, and to baptize in His name to the ends of the earth. Think about that for a moment. What would your have done?

I know that I first of all would have been scared to death! And perhaps for want of any other way to approach this mission, I would have begun to pray as I had never prayed before, and like Christ in the Garden, I would probably have prayed that this cup pass me by. It all seems too impossible. Imagine eleven uneducated and unsophisticated men being sent to bring the Good News of salvation to the entire world. I don't know how they had the presence of mind to elect another to complete the twelve, but they did, and then they just prayed and waited. Jesus said they wouldn't be orphans, and that He was going to send a Paraclete to help them, and so they remained in a familiar place and waited. Waited undoubtedly for something or someone that they did not fully understand.

When the wind blew, and the house shook and the Tongues of Fire appeared above their heads, they seemed ready for the Holy Spirit if Peter is any example of the rest of the Apostles. So although we are told so little about these nine days between the Ascension of the Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit, they must have been crucial ones for the Apostles and disciples. These days of the Ascension have been described as a liturgical bridge between

Easter and Pentecost. It's a time when we move from a focus on the Resurrected Lord to a focus on what it means to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the *Acts of the Apostles* today Christ clearly sends His disciples out on mission from Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. In Matthew they are told to make disciples of all nations, but in order for them to do so they must first be empowered by the Holy Spirit which will be the focus of next week's celebration; today it is the mission itself that is our focus. We need not get caught up in "*looking up at the sky,*" but instead on sharing the Good News that has been revealed to us.

Part of the message we are to proclaim we might completely miss, and that is simply that with Christ we too are lifted up from an earthly grave but with Christ to heavenly glory. This is our new life, our new beginning. Alone, however, we are powerless to believe, to live or to spread this new life, our union with our Creator. But, if we look to *Ephesians* we can understand that it is only if we "*put all things beneath Christ's (His) feet,*" that we can live and share this new life.

Like the Apostles as they awaited in prayer the coming of the Spirit, we now await the Lord in His coming to us in the Eucharist through the power of that same Spirit. Here we are nourished to go about the same mission that the Lord entrusted to His Apostles, "*to make disciples of all nations.*" In our Baptism and Confirmation we have been given the Gifts of the Spirit that enable us to proclaim the Good News, but as we prepare for the coming of the Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost, we ask that those gifts be renewed in us. In case you don't remember what those gifts, they are *wisdom, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, understanding, piety, and fear of the Lord.* And do not worry even if you don't know what they are, you still have them. What is important is that we use them. These are not gifts for your personal fulfillment; they are gifts given to each of us for the community, where living more fully under the influence of the Spirit, so that like the Apostles, we might find our way of responding to the Spirit's presence as we accomplish Christ's mission.

Since we celebrate this feast today rather than last Thursday we do not have the nine days the Apostles and disciples had for a Novena of prayer, but we can still make a seven day Novena, asking in our prayer that the Spirit come upon us with Its richness so that we might have the wisdom to better understand how in our everyday lives we can be agents of the Spirit and with courage to use the Spirit's Gifts to make our faith a living reality that others will see and seek. "*Come, Holy Spirit, come!*" is a simple prayer, but with its simplicity it makes us each the Lord's servants ready to be filled, and sent, and ready to bear fruit.