

Ascension of the Lord A/2008

The celebration of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven is the crowning of the paschal times and the beginning of the Church's journey. The risen Lord is not only present in the midst of his disciples, but he sits, from now on, in majesty, in the glory of the Father. It means that the Resurrection of Jesus and his Ascension are the celebration of the same mystery of his glorification at the right hand of the Father. That is what the readings of this feast of Ascension bring to our attention.

First of all, there is this truth St Paul expresses in his letter to the Ephesians, namely, that God has exercised his great might by raising Christ from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens. Through his Resurrection and Ascension, Christ was made the Lord of every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that exists not only in this age but also in the one to come. In that sense, everything that exists is put beneath Christ's feet. He is the head of all things in the universe as well as of the Church which is his body.

In order to understand this deep mystery, we have to ask God to give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation who will lead us in the true knowledge of him. We have to ask him, also, to enlighten the eyes of our hearts so that we come to know the hope that belongs to our call and the riches of his glory that we have inherited in his Son, Jesus Christ. In that sense, it is in Christ that all things are united and reconciled. Christ died to bring all the discordant element in the universe into one, to wipe out the separations, and to reconcile human beings with one another and with God. Consequently, Christ was put above all things as God's instrument of reconciliation.

It is the same idea the book of the Acts of the Apostles develops by confirming the fact that the Resurrection and the Ascension are the celebration of a single mystery of the glorification of Jesus. It describes especially the last apparition of Jesus to his disciples and the fact that he is sitting now at the right hand of God in heaven. In order to come to that conclusion, the Acts recalls the history of Jesus that has attained its climax in his resurrection from the dead.

After his resurrection, Jesus presented himself alive to his apostles by many proofs for forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. Before being lifted up into heaven, he assured them of his permanent presence and promised them the Holy Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit was going to make them his witnesses, that is, people who can stand for the truth of Jesus and give testimony about him to others. That witness was to start from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

This explains the importance of the mission of the Church as expressed in today's Gospel. As Jesus says, "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".

The Church has a mission to bring the good news of God's kingdom to others, to tell them that God loves them and wants them to be saved in his son Jesus Christ. The Church has the duty to baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and not in the name of something or someone else. It means, also, that by our baptism we declare our belonging to the people of God as we manifest publicly our intent to convert and change our lives according to the teaching of Jesus, for our eternal salvation.

The mission that was given to the disciples is given to us today. As Jesus was sent by the Father to bring the message of salvation to the world, he entrusts that proclamation to us. We have to make Christ present in the world and to others, each one according to his/her vocation. We have to continue the work of evangelization in the world so that people may come to know Jesus and receive their salvation. It is up to us, then, to make the Church grow and the word of Jesus bear lasting fruits in the lives of those who welcome him.

Given that we live in a very difficult time in our society and culture, how can we succeed in our mission of evangelization? In this difficult task, Jesus reassures us that he will be always with us, until the end of the world. He is always present with us and among us. We will never lack of his continual assistance. Of course, he reigns at the right hand of the Father in heaven, but he is still with us here on earth, in an invisible way, sustaining us, encouraging us and empowering us. When we are tired and, sometimes, are overwhelmed with problems, conflicts and duties, Jesus is always with us.

That is why the Ascension does not mean that Jesus is now hidden in the cloudy heaven, far from us. It means only that the risen Lord is not submitted anymore to the limitations of time, space and the material world. He is beyond any space and any time. For the same reason, heaven describes more a state of happiness and blessedness where we will be with God forever than some local place beyond the sky.

All that helps us understand the reproach of the angels towards the disciples: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing looking at the sky"? The sky... that is not the place to look for Jesus. We have to find him here in our multiple commitments in society and in the ordinary activities of life. Before Jesus comes again, we have to keep working and transform the conditions of our present world, as an anticipation of the world to come. Moreover, we do not know when he comes again. Because of that, we have to keep vigilance so that when he returns we might not be surprised. We have to stay awake. We have to be active in the world and not passive. That is the grace we have to ask in the celebration of the Ascension of the Lord. May God bless you all!

Acts 1, 1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Matthew 28, 16-20



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