

## Feast of the Ascension (B)

St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes

May 16, 17, 2015

As we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord this weekend, we can look at this moment in the life of Jesus from three different vantage points. All three are valid approaches, and each of them can offer us a unique and even helpful insight into the mystery of Jesus' return to the Father. The Ascension is a major Feast of the Church because it is a critical and transitional moment in the life of Jesus. It is critical also to us, because we are told that if Jesus did not return to the Father, He could not send us the Holy Spirit.

One of the ways to view this Feast is to think about it in the most obvious of ways, namely Jesus physically absents himself from the earth returns to His Father.

Scriptures tell us that this happened 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead. Following this tradition literally, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Ascension 40 days after Easter Sunday. This is how for generations we got used to celebrating this Feast on a Thursday ... and even called the Feast "Ascension Thursday". Many of us have known the Feast this way. With new approaches to reading Scripture and especially with new theological understandings that saw the Ascension of Jesus as necessary to the entire mystery of salvation, dioceses began to celebrate the Feast of the Ascension on a Sunday, the Day of the Lord. The Church began to see Jesus' ascension as essential as his death and his resurrection. But using this approach, we probably reflect more on the event of his ascending up to heaven than on the meaning and necessity of the event itself. We get caught up with the historicity rather than the meaning of the event.

Another way to look at the Ascension is to focus on the part of the Scriptures that has Jesus say, "Go proclaim the gospel to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The words of Introduction to today's Liturgy focused on this aspect. The Second Scripture that we heard today also focuses on the work yet to be done. Jesus had planted the seed of the Kingdom into the world, but when he returned to His Father, he gave the ministry of proclaiming and spreading the Kingdom to His apostles. In that second Scripture, St. Paul writes: "*live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: ....*" Jesus depended on the disciples to carry forward his ministry of salvation. Whenever we focus the homily on connecting the Scriptures to daily life, we emphasize this way of understanding the Feast of the Ascension. Jesus is no longer here bodily to do his work, and so we need to carry on for him, proclaiming and spreading the Kingdom of God in our own age. This is a legitimate use of the homily, and one that people appreciate.

But there is a third vantage point that can be helpful, and I think really necessary. I would like to spend a little time with that aspect before we conclude our time of breaking open the Word of God for today.

This third approach asks us to look beyond our lives here and to look to where we are headed. While we need to know how to live here, but really the only reason to live in a Christian manner here is so that we can join Jesus and His Father and Holy Spirit in the Kingdom. Working for peace, and extending charity is only so we can inspire others to look to God, to look to the Kingdom. All the Scriptures and the entire Christian life are fundamentally about how we are in communion with God here, and how that communion with God will only be complete and permanent after we die and are with God in the Kingdom. Connecting with God here is important; knowing how to relate the Scriptures to our daily lives is necessary. But again, we do this so we can have communion with God in the Kingdom. In another place St. Paul says it well, "*it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.*" God lives in us now, and we are intended to live with God in heaven. We must keep our eyes beyond our daily lives, even though living our lives here in a Christ-like manner is important.

Today's Feast is not just another story about Jesus; it is also about something that happens to us.

- In the Ascension we see our humanity raised to the highest heaven in the person of Jesus Christ.
- In the Ascension we celebrate the final outcome of the work of redemption, our glorification before the throne of the Father.
- This Feast proclaims that heaven is already ours in Christ. Everything that is Jesus' is also ours.

If we have died with Christ, we shall also rise with Christ, and today we can also claim that with Christ we have in some sense already entered into glory.

### **What example can I use?**

Immigrants ... the father or an older son leaves Europe to come to America and find a place. When he finds such a place, he sends for the rest of the family and they come as well. But in a real sense, when the father, the eldest son, etc. came in the first place, they all came. The coming of the first member of the family was the promise that all would eventually come.

That is how I like to see this Feast. When Jesus ascended to the Father, it was the promise that we as faithful disciples would do so also. We rejoice in Jesus' glorification and his return to the Father, because each time that he enters a new phase of his Paschal Mystery we are promised that we will enter that phase also. Each event in the life of Jesus is the promise of that same event happening in our own life.

We must be careful not to become so bogged down in life, that we forget that our Head, Jesus Christ, has penetrated the heavens and that as members of His Body we are destined to do the same. Lift up your arms sometime this week ...even as if you are stretching to greet the morning ... and say, "Jesus where you are, I desire to be!"

Maybe we can close by standing and singing together....

Song: "Lift Up Your Hearts to the Lord" It is No. 541 in your Music Issue.