

## THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD YEAR A

### Homily 1

It is a wonderfully rich and symbolic scenario that Matthew puts together today to sum up his gospel. Jesus has been crucified. He has since risen. Matthew tells us that the disciples *set out for Galilee* – hesitant, yet open to be surprised. Where is Galilee? For them, Galilee is where they come from, where they live, where they are at home. For us readers, Galilee is postcode 3400, where we live, where we work, with the family, whatever. They set out *to the mountain*: where the air is thinner, closer to the sky, to the heavens, to wherever we best get closer to the mystery that is God, to however we best get closer to the mystery that is God – for me, that is wherever I can be still and descend into my deeper self.

*Jesus came up and spoke to them.* Jesus comes towards them. He takes the initiative. He steps into our lives, and he says: *Know that I am with you always*, in life as it is (not as it should be, or would have been if, but as it is), into your life, just as you are – not yet ready perhaps, hesitant, but open.

Who is the one who is with us? Jesus, the one to whom God has now *given all authority*: not the capacity to impose from without, from above, but the power and the energy to author, to initiate, to make happen, to give life to.

As he powerfully steps into our lives, he directs us to *make disciples of all the nations*, of everyone, no one excluded, to make disciples, i.e. followers of Jesus, lovers of life, lovers of God, lovers of people – like Jesus

But can anyone make anyone come alive with love? He had trouble himself; he hardly succeeded by the time they crucified him, but his method involved, among other things, exposing people to God, to the God who is, to the God whom he loved so deeply.

So, not surprisingly, he says to us: *Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit*: immerse them in the reality, the truth of God, whose love and mercy he had shown to the world in his own love and mercy, and who wants to continue doing that, through our love and mercy as we open ourselves to his Spirit. *Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy*

*Spirit.* But baptism is a community action, the action of the community of disciples, of the Church. It consists in bringing people on board, bringing people into the community of disciples, of lovers of God, of each other, of anyone.

He went on to say: *Teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.* The lifestyle of genuine disciples, lovers of Jesus, is inevitably guided by the lifestyle of Jesus. His commands translate the deepest values of his heart into a world that seems sometimes frightened to run the risk of loving deeply, and unfree to move the spotlight from their own comfort zone to active concern for others, particularly for the ones who were the focus of so much of Jesus' concern – the marginalised, the oppressed, the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned.

Let's listen again to the risen Jesus as he says this time to us: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always.*

Thanks to Matthew, for summing up the gospel so masterfully!

## **Homily 2**

*Teach them to observe all the commandments I gave you...* How on earth do you do that? It might help to reflect on how Jesus himself went about it? How did Jesus teach (people) to *observe his commandments*? I think, for a start, he caught their interest; and I think that he managed to do that by showing them that he cared about them, saw them as important, that he believed the best about them, or, simply, in a word, by loving them.

I think that the next thing that he did was to get them interested in wanting to be like him. They needed to see that he had something about him that they didn't have, but would like to have: a certain freedom and wisdom and inner peace and a readiness to reach out to others. Once they wanted to be like he was, they were ready to listen and to find out the answer to what made him tick. Then, he was able to tell them ... to tell them about his sense of God, his sense of the dignity of every person, his dream of how the world could become a wonderful world to live in. (That's what his *commandments* are about, after all – how to live so that the world can become a wonderful place to live in.)

Was that enough? I don't think so. I think they needed encouragement. They needed to see it was possible, i.e. they needed hope. They needed help to put up with the natural resistance in themselves, i.e., they needed freedom to not quite always measure up, and yet to know that they were forgiven – wholeheartedly forgiven. And we could go on...

Did Jesus succeed in *teaching people to observe all he had commanded them?* No way! He didn't succeed with many at all, really... not with Judas, not with most Pharisees, not with most of the people, even those he healed and fed.

How are we going? How are we managing to get others in our time and in our world to join with us in making the world a wonderful place to live in? It might be because we haven't managed to attract their interest. Perhaps they are perfectly satisfied with how they're going. They mightn't listen to us because they don't sense that we really care about them or are genuinely interested in them. Or because they don't see us as any different from them, and with nothing to give them – no obvious wisdom or inner peace or special warmth. It might be our fault. It might be their fault. It might be everyone's fault. It might be no one's fault.

Jesus didn't succeed with everyone... but he tried – to the point of laying down his life. We mightn't have a terrific track record, but we can keep on trying. But we shall help others to change only to the extent that we are prepared to keep on loving, forgiving, being at peace, etc..

### **Homily 3**

Last Sunday, I went up to the Mallee township of Rainbow, right out at the edge of the Wyperfeld National Park, with the Little Desert stretching out westwards. The little Catholic community there were celebrating the centenary of the building of their Church. To mark the occasion, one of the parishioners had collated some facts and figures and photos and put them together into a small booklet.

One of the items that attracted my attention was a report from the local paper. I shall read out a small section: *.. the decadence of any rural centre very soon becomes reflected in the dilapidated conditions of its various churches. ... in many cases the existing structures are more than ample for the diminished demands, and the churches merely become mournful monuments of departed prosperity.... This is especially*

*noticeable at a time when so much is being said and written concerning ... the growing number of people who absent themselves from places of worship...* When was it dated? 25 March, 1911 -- a hundred years ago. I was surprised. So much for the good old days! Perhaps perversely, it also had the effect of cheering me up!

Sometimes, as I look at our present world, I am tempted to feel disheartened. So much that is going on distresses me deeply. You might feel similarly yourselves. After dedicating my life and energies within the Church for the building up of God's Kingdom, I am tempted to wonder what there is to show for it all -- what we have achieved? What keeps me sane, what keeps me still having a go, [apart from the occasional engaging newspaper cutting of a hundred years ago] is an even older comment made two thousand years ago: *I am with you always.*

I am with you always. The one who said it was one who had floated a vision to transform the world. He had been killed... gone -- eliminated without a struggle, shamed and humiliated by the religious establishment and the secular power of Rome. And here he was - alive, telling this small group of eleven men that he was none other than the Son of God, sharing the power of God, indeed (as today's Second Reading put it), *seated at the right hand of God.*

And who were these *eleven*? former followers who, under pressure, had denied ever having known him, had deserted him and left him to die helplessly hanging on a cross. And some of them still didn't know where they stood -- *some of them hesitated.* To this confused group of eleven men, who still hadn't said a word of apology, he entrusted the mission to transform the world. He trusted them. I draw enormous encouragement from all this.

It leads me to ask: What is success? As Jesus died, his only success was his integrity. He died unshakeably hoping [not seeing - hoping] ... hoping, not in his strength, but in the power of his Father, in the power, ultimately, of loving.

This is the one whose mission we share - *teach them to observe all the commands I gave you...* keep declaring to the world that the only program that leads to life and to genuine human fulfilment is the choice to love, to keep on loving, and never to compromise. We are, none of us, any more suitable for the task than were that worshipping, hesitant eleven. But we draw strength from his unambiguous assurance, despite all our unworthiness and inadequacy: *I am with you always.*

## Homily 4

All three magnificent readings today are unanimous: the community of disciples, the Church, is Christ still at work in the world – the body of Christ. It all sounds great. Yet, over recent years, a number of people I know cannot buy that any more. The clerical sexual abuse crisis has rattled their faith in the Church – what priests and religious child-abusers did, but also how bishops, and even Rome, handled the whole situation. A lot no longer come near Church; and many of those who continue to come feel shamed, betrayed, torn and confused, hurting and angry. I have felt all of the above ... with the exception, perhaps, that I no longer feel confused.

But I do feel sad that so many, in their anger, have walked away – sad, because the Church, that is, all of us, needs their anger. Anger can be destructive – and that is no help. But anger also provides the indispensable motivation and energy to work for and to insist on the cultural and structural changes that are so necessary and overdue. Without it the Church will do nothing beyond damage control and window dressing.

That many people feel confused can surprisingly be providential. Confusion can be the spur to reexamine what we have previously taken for granted. For better or for worse, only when we feel confused and no longer in control do we confront the inadequacy of where we are, lose faith in our previous convictions and let go of them. Only then are we motivated to look more deeply – and to mature. As long as we remain satisfied with business as usual, we never grow up.

What I have had to discover and to come to terms with over the years is the reality of sin in the Church and in myself. None of us in the Church, from the Pope to the bishops, to us priests and religious, to yourselves is free from sin. Our rank or role or ministry in the Church is no fail-proof indicator of whether we are saint or sinner. To believe or to expect otherwise is to set ourselves up to be disillusioned. At every Mass, Pope Francis, Bishop Paul, along with you and me, say quite clearly in the hearing of everyone, *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof*. It is true.

That the Church is the Body of Christ does not mean that its members are sinless. The only worthwhile reason to be in the Church is because we are sinners. Hopefully, we are sinners on a journey of growth and ever-deepening conversion, enlightenment and liberation. But there is little likelihood that any one of us ever arrives.

Despite our indisputable sinfulness, we have been commissioned to tell the world that God loves the world, this sinful, cruel world that is constantly pulling itself apart. This God of Jesus looks at us always with compassion, fully aware of the aching holes and unhealed wounds buried deep in the psyches of us all that drive us to act destructively. God looks at us not to condemn but to set us free. Yet while commissioned to preach it, we struggle to believe it.

It would be such a better Church, such a better world ... if we all stopped pretending and learnt to see ourselves and each other with the tender gaze of our compassionate God; ... if we all stopped judging ourselves and each other and learnt instead to encourage and support each other in our struggles; ... if we learnt to name sin as sin, in all its brutal destructiveness, yet know that every sin is forgivable. Forgiveness is a mystery that we never understand fully or achieve unaided. Yet we can learn to open to the Spirit. We can hope to continue growing until we become free to receive the gift that is otherwise impossible for us – the mysterious exhilaration of whole-heartedly forgiving those who hurt us.

That is what the Spirit of Jesus wants to do in our world. The Spirit uses sinners to forgive sinners – simply because there is no one else whom the Spirit can use.

## **Homily 5**

I remember in the mid-seventies going up to Broome for a few weeks. I had been asked to give a couple of retreats to the priests of the Broome diocese. When not giving the retreats, I stayed in the presbytery where an older indigenous woman was the house-keeper. She took the opportunity of the visiting priest to ask me a few questions about some things on her mind. I can't remember now what they were, but I do remember asking her if she read much on spiritual things. She casually answered that, whenever Fr Mick, the PP, finished a book, he would pass it on to her and she would read it eagerly. She was as well-read as he was.

We shall have a few guests staying with us in the presbytery tomorrow night. One is an Aboriginal woman named Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, from Daly River. I first heard of her a long time ago – in the seventies, I think – and I am thrilled that after all these years I shall meet up with her. What first interested me was something she wrote about what she called a *“special quality of my people. ... It is our most unique gift. It is*

*perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called "dadirri". It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. ... This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call "contemplation".* Paddy tells me that Miriam-Rose will be talking to students and staff at St Mary's on Tuesday.

What got me musing about these two women was, firstly, "Sorry Day" that was celebrated on Friday; then yesterday the fiftieth anniversary of the referendum that allowed indigenous people to be finally counted as citizens of this nation; and, finally, National Reconciliation Week that we shall mark this coming week. In addition to all that, there was the big meeting of indigenous leaders assembled in Uluru this past week who decided to press the Australian Government to work towards a Treaty with indigenous people. The sooner, the better!

Within this context, there echoes also in my mind the directive that the Risen Christ gave to his eleven first disciples [as we heard today in Matthew's Gospel], "*Go, make disciples of all the nations.*" The danger, I believe, is that most of us, whatever we think of ourselves, are all very much in the process of discovering more and more just what being disciples involves. In today's First Reading from Luke's Acts of the Apostles, we had Jesus saying, "*You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth*". Do we stand out as *witnesses* of the Jesus who was crucified precisely because of his insistence that his Father was a God of forgiveness, of mercy and of reconciliation? It strikes me that making disciples of others, of witnessing to the message and mission of Christ, are as much factors of our learning as they are of teaching others. Personally, I feel there is so much I can still learn from people like Miriam-Rose. I would love to acquire more of her "*inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness*".

The feast of the Ascension is a celebration of Jesus' kingship, his "*sitting at God's right hand*" [as the Second Reading quaintly put it]. Our celebration of that kingship would be more focussed if we could prioritise three more attitudes that Miriam-Rose identified. She wrote: "*Many Australians understand that Aboriginal people have a special respect for Nature. The identity we have with the land is sacred and unique. Many people are beginning to understand this more. Also there are many Australians who appreciate that Aboriginal people have a very strong sense of community. All persons matter. All of us belong. And there are many more Australians now, who understand that we are a people who celebrate together.*"

Deep listening and quiet awareness ... respect for nature ... all persons matter ... memories celebrated together. Clear tributes to the *authority* exercised by Christ!

## Homily 6

St Luke, I think, was the only New Testament author who wrote explicitly about Jesus' Ascension. But he was a powerful story-teller, so his insight into the mystery of what happened to the risen Jesus is the one with which we are most familiar. The important thing about the Risen Jesus is what was mentioned in today's Second Reading — that he now *"sits at God's right hand"*. We recite the Creed: *"He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty"*. To sit at the right hand of another meant, in the imagery of the time, to share in the power of the other. So the risen Jesus came to share the same power as God.

But wasn't Jesus already God? Yes! So ... did not the historical Jesus share the power of God? The answer is, perhaps surprisingly: No! St Paul made the point quite clearly in his Letter to the Philippians. *"His state [referring to the Christ, the Word of God] was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself ... and became as men are"* — that is, he became human in Jesus. The historical human Jesus became *"like us in all things but sin"*; he *"was tempted as we are"*, etc. In other words, the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, chose to become human. Divinity was humanised. But, with the resurrection, the human, historical Jesus became divine through the Father who raised him out of death. His humanity was divinised — and with him, all humanity, us. In one of the Epistles of Peter, we are referred to *"sharers in the divine nature"*, no less!

Pope Benedict, preaching his first Easter homily as Pope back in 2007, said this, *"Christ's Resurrection ... if we may borrow the language of the theory of evolution, is the greatest "mutation", absolutely the most crucial leap into a totally new dimension that there has ever been in the long history of life and its development: a leap into a completely new order which does concern us, and concerns the whole of history..."*. Just a little further on in the same homily, he repeated, *"[The Resurrection] is a qualitative leap in the history of "evolution" and of life in general towards a new future life, towards a new world which, starting from Christ, transforms this world of ours, and draws it to itself"*.

As we continue to reel from the Covid-19 pandemic, we hear voices crying out to get back as quickly as possible to “business as usual”. Others are more circumspect and counsel us to review, to take on board any lessons to be learnt from our experience of partial lockdown, and to be open to change and improvement.

Pope Francis would align himself generally with the second group. But rather than move immediately to practical solutions, he calls for something more radical -- that we examine our attitudes to each other and to our world with its urgent ecological and environmental needs. He reminds us that the ones who have suffered most, whether at the local or the global levels, have been the poorest and the most marginalised.

He invites everyone, but particularly us disciples of Jesus, to adopt what he calls a contemplative approach — to see people and our world in the light of our dignity as creatures, dearly loved by our creating and gracious God and redeemed by the crucified Jesus. He suggests that we love each other and our world. He views the appearance and the ravages of the Covid-19 virus as unsurprising, given our generally cavalier attitudes in the past to the dignity of others and to our responsibility towards our material world with which we are intrinsically connected and on which we inexorably depend.

Who would have thought that the Feast of the Ascension would lead us to such pressingly urgent reflection!

### **Homily 7**

Today’s First Reading has given us Luke’s imaginative presentation of the risen Jesus’ final moments on earth. He was with the Apostles —somewhere on the Mount of Olives. Luke simply wrote, “... *he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. Suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said, ‘...Jesus has been taken up from you into heaven...’.*”

Is that all? Not quite.

The Prophet Daniel had given a sort of preview of what would be the destiny, sometime in the future, of one he called "The Son of Man" -- a title Jesus applied to himself. Daniel wrote: “*I gazed into the visions of the night. And I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, one like a son of man. He came to the one of great age and was led into his*

*presence. On him was conferred sovereignty, glory and kingship”. [As we shall soon say of Jesus in the Creed, “He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”.]*

So today we celebrate the original feast of Christ the King. This is what his incarnation, his brutal death and his resurrection had all been leading up to.

But, when thinking of Jesus’ *kingship*, we need to be careful. Jesus made clear that his way of being king would be nothing like earthly kingships; it has nothing at all to do with wealth or coercive power or celebrity. Jesus had insisted to his disciples, “*I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life...*”. Elsewhere, he made clear to Pilate: “*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews... but my kingdom is not of this kind*”.

So what might all that involve for us, his disciples? Let us look briefly at what Matthew wrote in today's Gospel passage. He wanted to make clear what the ascended Jesus stipulated at the first disciples' job- description - realising at the same time that their job-description would become our job-description. But I suggest that we approach it imaginatively, asking ourselves what did Jesus want to impress on the disciples, and to leave with them.

He began by saying to them: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*”. Jesus' authority stemmed from his personal integrity and authenticity, and is experienced by others as life-giving. Now ascended to the Father, Jesus will always and only be encountered by people as life-giving.

Jesus then extended that same responsibility to disciples: “*Go and make disciples of all the nations*”. To *make disciples* is to call people into relationship — with Jesus himself and with the welcoming community. The call is not just to us as individuals but to individuals within their diverse cultures — that also need to be converted with them.

He went on: “*Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”. To *baptise* involves to plunge into, to saturate. The aim of the whole Christian exercise is to soak people in the life of the Trinity, of the Father, the Son and the

Spirit; to saturate everyone in the divine love that is the life-giving, joyful energy that creates and sustains the whole created world.

*“Teach them to observe all the commandments I gave to you”*. Show them how to hold on to and to cherish what was important to Jesus: those behaviours that he so often emphasised — and especially to learn to appreciate why he insisted, to the point of death, that everyone, together, love even enemies.

And finally, *“Know that I am with you always”*. That’s wonderful! But our effectiveness supposes that we eagerly accept and diligently work on Jesus’ offer of closeness and friendship.

**Fr. John McKinnon**

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