

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (YEAR A)

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:17-23

Matthew 28:16-20

“AS THEY WERE LOOKING ON, HE WAS LIFTED UP, AND A CLOUD TOOK HIM FROM THEIR SIGHT.”

There is an ancient legend about Jesus' ascension into heaven.

He is met by the angel Gabriel who asks him, "Now that your work is finished, what plans have you made to ensure that the truth that you brought to earth will spread throughout the world?"

Jesus answered, "I have called some fishermen and tax-collectors to walk along with me as I did my Father's will."

"Yes, I know about them," said Gabriel, "but what other plans have you made? "

Jesus replied, "I taught Peter, James and John about the kingdom of God; I taught Thomas about faith; and all of them were with me as I healed and preached to the multitudes."

Gabriel replied, "But you know how unreliable that lot was. Surely you must have other plans to make sure your work was not in vain."

Jesus quietly replied to Gabriel, "I have no other plans. I am depending on them!! "

Today is the 7th and the last Sunday of Easter Season. The feast of **“The Ascension of the Lord”** that we celebrate today was actually last Thursday – exactly 40 days after Easter, but because of its importance and for pastoral reasons we are allowed to move it to this Sunday, as we have done today.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels we have the end scene of Jesus' earthly life, in which he finally takes leave of his disciples. But there are important similarities and differences between Lk-Acts on one hand and Mt-Mk on the other:

In Lk-Acts the Ascension takes place in Bethany, near Jerusalem, whereas in Mt-Mk it takes place in Galilee. However, both agree that it takes place on a mountain.

In Lk-Acts the Ascension happens 40 days after Resurrection, during which Jesus repeatedly appears to his disciples. But in Mt-Mk there is no indication of the time-

period between the Resurrection and the Ascension – rather the 1st appearance of Risen Jesus is also the last.

The above discrepancies, however, show that the Evangelists are not actually aiming at the historical details of the Ascension, but are more concerned about giving a message of hope of our glorification and of the task of carrying forward the mission of Jesus.

Today, we have St. Luke's account of the Ascension as described in the First Reading of today from the Acts of Apostles. Jesus led his disciples as far as Bethany and we are told that on a mountain **“As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.”** Then, they joyfully returned to Jerusalem praising God. There are two details worth noting in this description:

Firstly, it took place in *'Bethany,'* the place from which Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Now it is also from Bethany that Jesus enters the *'heavenly Jerusalem'* - the *'dwelling place'* of His Father.

Secondly, the *'cloud'* mentioned is no ordinary cloud. In the Old Testament, the cloud was a sign not only of the Father's closeness to His people but also of His presence. So, we are told that it is the Father who is at work in the Ascension of Jesus.

“The Ascension of the Lord” is a special event in the life of Jesus and an important feast in the Church. How, therefore, do we look at it? What actually is the meaning of Ascension and what is its significance for us today?

Firstly, **Ascension is a glorification of Our Lord Jesus Christ** and it was an event expected after his Resurrection. As a matter of fact, the Suffering & Death of Jesus, his Resurrection, his Ascension and Pentecost all form one unit, and they are inseparably linked with one another, each necessarily implying the other.

We do watch games and sports and we often witness that when a team or a player wins, soon after the match is over, the key players of the winning team or the winning player is joyfully lifted up high by their supporters. It was the same with Jesus – Resurrection was his victory over sin & death – and immensely filled with joy, God the Father lifted him up to heaven in His arms – and this we call Ascension. Now that

Jesus awaits us in heaven, his Ascension is the hope of our glorification and a guarantee to meet him in heaven.

Moreover, Ascension is a setting stage for Pentecost – for a new heart, a new spirit & a new power of faith, a feast we will be celebrating next Sunday. When the Father took Jesus into heaven, He also made special provisions for his departure: He would send down the Holy Spirit. As the Gospel of Luke says: Jesus promised his disciples that they would be **‘clothed with power from on high.’**

Secondly, *Ascension marks the end of Jesus' earthly work of redemption;* i.e. Jesus stopped appearing to his disciples and was not with them any more in a physical sense. But it did not mean that the mission of Jesus came to an end. In the Scripture Readings of today, we hear that immediately before his Ascension, Jesus entrusted his mission to his disciples - **“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea & Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** The same mission is now ours, both as individuals and as a community of believers - as Church. The saving work begun by Jesus is now to be continued by the Church through us, her members. Jesus is present in the Church in a different manner; i. e. He is the invisible leader of the visible Church. From this day of Ascension onward the physical presence of Christ becomes sacramental, so that Christ can always be with us in the signs which we call Sacraments – Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick. In these Sacraments we are allowed to experience the presence of Christ while we are still on earth.

Thirdly, *Ascension can also be seen as Jesus parting from his disciples.* In the 1st Reading of today from the Acts of the Apostles, we have the farewell scenario, the intimate moment of separation, well pictured – this shows the departure of Jesus, like a Helium balloon rising higher & higher and finally disappearing in the sky, becoming out of sight. This could had been a sad moment for the disciples; but Jesus fills them with joy through his parting gifts; viz. *'Gift of understanding, so that they can fully comprehend the Scripture; Promise of the power of the Holy Spirit; And a loving final blessing, with the promise that he will never abandon them and will be with them till the end of times.'*

In the farewell scenario, the disciples were also given the glimpse and assurance of Christ's second and final coming, **“Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? 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.”**

This belief in the after-life is what we hear in the Second Reading of today from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, **“May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory... and what is the surpassing greatness of his power...”** What a beautiful prayer that is – and such strange imagery.

St. Paul makes this more explicit by telling us that God the Father has Jesus seated **“at his right hand in the heavens.”** To be seated at God's right hand is a Hebrew idiom for *'To share power with God.'* This is another way of saying that the Father has made Jesus Lord of heaven and earth - which is what we really celebrate on the feast of the Ascension.

St. Paul goes on to explain further that Christ lives but that we have become his earthly body. We now take on his body. We now need to become Christ for others. Once he left the earth he has given us his Spirit so that we can carry on his work.

The Gospel Reading from St. Matthew, known in the tradition as *'the great commission,'* shows Jesus sending his followers out to preach and baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The scope of their mission is universal. They are sent to *'all nations,'* not only to Israel. At the opening of the passage, Jesus appears as Lord of the universe. The very sight of him dispels the last lingering doubts of his followers. He speaks in regal fashion, with a word of command. Yet his promise to remain with them always affirms the intimacy of the disciples with their Lord - **“And behold, I am with you always , until the end of age.”**

To conclude, the feast of **“The Ascension of the Lord”** is the hope of our glorification and a guarantee to meet our Lord in heaven. It is a reminder of our salvation, a reminder that our true home is in heaven. So, today, we are challenged to look beyond this world to the destiny which we are to share with Christ in heaven. Thus, this world can only be a place of temporary refuge; a world of passage and not a world of

permanence. But, myopic as we are, unfortunately, we are sometimes caught by the assumption that this is the only life there is.

Moreover, this feast of the Ascension is also a reminder for all of us, not just of what awaits us when we die, but also what we need to do while still on earth alive. Jesus before his Ascension commissioned his disciples, and us too, to be his witnesses and carry out his mission to the ends of the earth till his return. A big task indeed. But before we can proclaim Jesus to others, our first task is to make sure that we make Jesus the Lord of our own hearts. This we can do by prayerfully reflecting on his words and by living according to his teachings and commandments. We have to make time to become more and more like Christ in everything. Then we can proclaim the Good News to others not only through our words and deeds, but also through our lives, so that Jesus will also reign in their hearts and one day we all will be with him in heaven. And this is the Good News of today.

Fr. Albert Lakra

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