

The Ascension of the Lord (A)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Matthew 28:16-20)
28.05.2017

He was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took Him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky when suddenly two men in white were standing near them and they said: Why are you men of Galilee standing here looking into the sky?

These penultimate lines of today's first reading are to be taken alongside the words Matthew's gospel places upon Jesus' lips as He prepares to take leave of this world: *Know that I am with you always, even to the end of time.*

Yes, even as Jesus ascends into heaven to be at the Father's right hand – where we are told *He now lives in glory for all eternity* – He is not to be thought of as far removed from us, a deity unconcerned by the realities of our lives in this broken world, but as One who still remains close to us; He is one with us always.

Christ is no further away from us than standing by our side. *He is closer to us than we are to our very selves.*

With its recurring reminders *God is by my side (...)* *You are at my side*, Liam Lawton's well-known song, *The Cloud's Veil*, recalls Jesus' promise to us in a beautiful way. For his part, St Augustine shares his experience of the Lord's proximity in these terms: *Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo ~ (The Lord is) higher than my highest self and yet more interior to me than my innermost self.*

When the disciples asked Jesus about the *coming of the kingdom* in today's first reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles – a question which displayed their deep yearning for the Messiah's promised reign of freedom and peace – Jesus' response to them amounted to an invitation to stay focused on where Christian disciples' attention should always be: on the here and now, fully aware of the realities of this world, rather than piously distracted by *other worldly* considerations. While we are undoubtedly to *think of heavenly things* – as Paul instructs us – we are not to lose sight of the implications of living our lives in this world with all the responsibilities that go with that. We are certainly not to *cop out* of real life by fleeing into thoughts only of, what the psalmist calls, *marvels beyond us.*

Jesus made it clear to His followers that in their focus should never lose sight of this present world's plight.

Jesus told His disciples that they were not to be thinking exclusively of things to come, worrying about them, considering only the future. He emphasised that they were to keep their eyes open to all that was going on around them in order to discern the Lord's presence and action at work in their earthly existence.

Our Easter celebration has no other goal than to help us realise that the resurrection life of Jesus is to be lived a present reality in our lives at each and every moment.

In today's gospel we heard Jesus remind His disciples of their mission: a mission which He invited them to exercise in the power of the Holy Spirit: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses.*

To minister in the power of the Spirit is to share the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, not only by proclaiming the gospel in words, but by making its essential message incarnate – giving flesh to it.

The real challenge of the Ascension is to dare to be Christ's new mode of presence to the world. As Teresa of Avila reminds us: *Christ now has no body on earth but ours. No hands but ours. No feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world. Ours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which He is to bless people now.*

Clearly, it befalls us to make Christ present to the world; present in the world. It is the Church's mission – our mission – to be a sacrament of Christ, to carry and convey the Lord to people who need to encounter His grace.

When Jesus took leave of this earth addressing these words to His disciples *I am with you always*, His hands raised in blessing over them, as Luke's gospel reminds us, He spelt out for those gathered around Him – and for us who have come to discipleship after them – this essential message: it pertains to us to be nothing less than channels of Christ's blessing for all those around us in the here and now. We fulfil this mission to our brothers and sisters in humanity to the extent that we live our lives well and truly as Jesus lived His: as children of the Father, men and women attuned to grace, witnesses to His compassionate love.

In light of what I have just said a very fundamental question each one of us must ask him or her self today is this: To where, to what, to whom are my eyes turned on this Ascension day? We must ask ourselves: Are we like those *men of Galilee* whom the angels addressed? Are we people who satisfy ourselves to stay put, gazing fixedly into the sky, when our focus on Christ should be leading us to be active elsewhere – there where the Lord awaits us, in people who need our care?

In the words the angels are recorded to have spoken to the disciples in our first reading it was made it clear that the sky-gazing eyes of the men of Galilee should not remain lifted from the world, but brought back to earth. They were told to be attentive to what was going on around them in ordinary life and to be actively engaged in mission therein.

I think it fair to say that our contemplation of Jesus in the mystery of His Ascension actually calls upon us to be *down to earth* Christians! The Ascended Christ Himself calls upon us to be what could be termed *grounded people* rather than *in the clouds folk*.

The One we contemplate today as He ascends into heaven assures us that He still lives here on earth. Christ lives in the hearts of our brothers and sisters – and in our own hearts too, of course, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is to Christ's presence within – within ourselves and within all those around us – that today's great feast of the Ascension invites us to be attentive.

If the Ascension is often thought of as a great contemplative feast – and there is a whole strand of monastic writings which speaks of it as such – it is also thought of, at one and the same time and without any contradiction between the two, as a great missionary feast in our Christian tradition.

Indeed, just as many monastic communities keep this feast with much solemnity (often as a Profession Day), so too many missionary congregations celebrate the mystery we celebrate with particular attention, precisely for the reasons I have just given, and, especially because of the explicit call that accompanied Christ's Ascension: the Risen Lord's injunction to proclaim the gospel '*ad gentes*'... *Go to all nations*.

The secret, and the challenge for us, of course, is to hold the two aspects of today's feast together.

If I can put it this way: it befalls us to celebrate the feast of the Ascension as a day of contemplation that prepares us for mission.

There is no doubt that today's Solemnity invites us to be *heavenly minded*, for it invites to remember that *we too are called to live where Christ now reigns*, near to God our Father. In light of this, it invites us *to long for heaven as our true homeland*, seeing life there, in communion with God, as the goal of our earthly pilgrimage. The epistle to the Hebrews is clear on this point. Clearly, our heavenly end should never be lost sight of, but a true contemplation of the Ascension – a just longing to be where Christ now is, the place to which He calls us – does not mean that we should live our lives *so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use*.

Animated by the Spirit, which was promised to us by Christ at His Ascension into heaven, we are called to live our lives here on earth pursuing Christ's own mission; doing as we are told Christ did: *going about the doing the good*.

Jesus summed up His mission in this world using words from the prophet Isaiah which He made His own in chapter 4 of Luke's gospel: *He sent me to bring good news to the poor...* It befalls us now to share God's Good News with the poor, to stand by the broken hearted, to minister to all who suffer... to do all this in a bid to contribute to wounded people's healing, by reaching out to those who are in distress, being close to those who are discouraged, helping those whose eyes are so dimmed and whose ears are so closed that they fail to recognise and cannot hear God's word of comfort. The call addressed to us to lead all people to the point where they grasp just how much God loves them; to come to the point where they recognise that the Lord has poured His love into their hearts by the Holy Spirit He has given to them.

We see over and over again in the lives of the Saints how contemplation of the beauty of Jesus' face in prayer should lead us to where it led them: to the recognition of a reflection of Christ's face upon that of every person encountered: especially all those disfigured faces we see in our world, faces which are marked by harrowing pain and deep suffering.

To be very practical let me put things this way. The authenticity of our contemplation of the Ascension today will be verified if and when it leads us to be genuinely attentive to those around us who are *down in the dumps* and need to be uplifted in the days to come. It is in this way that we will demonstrate that we are pursuing Christ's own mission here on earth.

I also believe that a proper appreciation of today's feast should help us grasp that in order to do Christ's work, to pursue His mission here on earth, we need to be men and women whose lives are rooted in and strengthened by contemplative prayer.

Amen!