

The Ascension of the Lord (B)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Mark 16:15-20)
13.05.2018

Someone sent me an e-mail last week which spoke of today's feast in terms of an end. This person referred to today's feast as our commemoration of *the end of the Risen Lord's walking this earth*. Jesus' being *taken up into heaven* – whatever that means – is not to be seen only in terms of an end of the Risen Christ being alive and active in our world. The Ascension marks more than an end; it also heralds a new beginning. Christ's taking leave of us in one way leads to Him being present to us in another. Jesus' own teaching makes this clear. Taking leaving of this earth, Jesus promised His disciples to be *with them always, even until the end of time*. The Risen Christ is present to us; He goes wherever we go; He lives in us, just as we are called to live in Him; He awaits that we recognise His presence in all those He sends our way. We think of those words Jesus spoke in which He stated that to welcome those He sent was to welcome Him. The Apostles were sent forth to minister in Christ's name with these words of encouragement ringing in their ears, to be kept alive in their hearts: *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me*. Christ is present not only in those who come overtly in His name. He is present not only in His ministers and those who bear His name. Matthew 25 reminds us that Jesus is also present to us in each and every needy person we encounter – whether or not that person professes to be a Christian. Recall Christ's words in the Last Judgement scene: *Whatever you did – or whatever you failed to do – to the least of these others, you did – or you failed to do – to me*.

The point to be grasped is that the Ascension of Jesus is about more than an end: His taking leave of this earth. The Ascension of Christ is also about a new beginning. It heralds the inauguration of a new mode of Christ's presence.

The Ascension of Jesus leads to the extension of Christ's ministry through the expansion of the Church throughout the world. The Scriptures show us how Christ's vertical movement – Jesus' return to the Father – was what instigated the extraordinary horizontal movement of His disciples... those whom He sent forth to *proclaim the Good News of the Gospel to all the nations*. We are told how the disciples' proclamation which began in Judea, expanded into Samaria and spread beyond there right across the whole world even to the very ends of the earth.

Gathered here this morning all of us are to be counted among the beneficiaries of the Christian mission. More than that, we are also called to be part of it. It befalls each one of us to do as the first disciples did: to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to spread His Gospel message abroad.

If Christ is no longer visible to earthly eyes, the Church has for mission to be the sacrament – an external, visible sign – of His abiding presence in the world. Gone to be with the Father, Christ remains nonetheless present with us. Jesus who said: *I am going to be with the Father* also stated *I am with you always, even until the end of time*.

Called to be the sacrament of Jesus' abiding presence in the world, the Church (we!) must do as Christ did: we must draw alongside people where they are at in life; we must dare to sit by their side and listen to their stories... we must strive to be there for others in the way that Christ was there for all those He encountered: in compassionate love, as channels of God's grace. It is as if the baton has been handed on to us. This implies that others should be able to look at us and see Christ in us.

I wonder if that is the case. Each one of us must ask ourself today: When other people look at my life and consider my actions, when they examine my attitudes etc., do they recognise a reflection of Christ's way of being in mine?

The disciples were challenged by the angel's words: *Men of Galilee, why stand there looking into the sky?* The challenge addressed to them is a challenge to us as well. It is a challenge to move beyond gazing into the sky. We must be careful not to content ourselves just to fix our eyes upon the clouds, we must see and be attentive to all that is going on around us here below. We must look to the mission confided to us. We are called to believe that Christ who is lovingly present in our hearts calls upon us to reach out to others in His name and also to recognise that He is there, in the people all around us, who await our attention. We are called to be the sacrament of Christ for all our brothers and sisters in humanity. We are meant to see our brothers and sisters as sacraments of Christ as well.

It is not only some chosen few – ordained ministers of the Church – who are called to be an *alter Christus, another Christ*, for their brothers and sisters. Originally it was to all the baptised that this title *alter Christus* was attributed – and that remains the case. Each one of us is – and each person we encounter is meant to be considered by us as – an *alter Christus, another Christ*.

The Second Vatican Council reminded us strongly all of the vocation of the laity in this respect.

Just the other day I was struck to read in the hand-written retreat notes of John-Paul II (notes stemming from a meditation upon I Tim 6:11 which he made in the course of his annual retreat of February 1980) the following words were written boldly: *The Church is the sign and sacrament. In the Church we are all in a way a sign and sacrament.* That whole 1980 Lenten retreat made by John-Paul II had centred on *ministry in the Church in the light of Vatican II*. If it looked at ministerial priesthood, it emphasised strongly the importance of a renewed appreciation of the priesthood of all the faithful. Evidently John-Paul II recognised and felt compelled to note the need for a sense of the priesthood of all the faithful to be reawakened within the hearts of God's People – our hearts. Among those John-Paul drew upon in his retreat reflections were the Protestant Reformers who had emphasised the priesthood of all the faithful.

Vatican II articulated clear thought in respect to the priesthood of all the faithful. The Council developed abundantly the whole concept of the Church as the sacrament of Christ in the world. It spoke much of the important role we all have to play in the work of evangelisation – all of us, without exception! The mission of the Church concerns each and every one of her members. It is not the ministry of just some designated quota of missionaries. One document in particular – the Teaching Decree *Lumen Gentium* – spoke eloquently of the role the laity have to play in the Church's mission today. Let me quote some of the things we read in *Lumen Gentium*: *The laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become salt of the earth... the laity perform a work of great value for the evangelisation of the world. It befalls them... to imbue culture and human activity with genuine moral values.*

John-Paul's retreat notes which I referred to a little earlier speak of *the call to manifest God's goodness as something which is within the possibility of each and every one of us.*

If, as I said, the Church's mission is to extend that of Christ on earth, then it befalls us to do as Jesus did: *to go about doing the good*, being compassionately present to others. One Eucharistic Prayer takes up this theme which stems from a little phrase found in Acts 10:38. I

am referring to the *Fourth Eucharistic Prayer for Special Occasions* which is entitled: *Jesus, Who Went About Doing Good*. This liturgical prayer has us implore the Lord in the following words: *Open our eyes to the needs of our brothers and sisters; inspire in us words and actions to comfort those who labour and are burdened. Make us serve them truly, after the example of Christ and at His command. And may Your Church stand as a living witness to truth and freedom, to peace and justice, that all people may be raised to a new hope.*

The point is made here that we cannot satisfy ourselves by gazing into the skies in the hope of contemplating Christ enthroned upon the clouds – sitting at God’s right hand in majesty; we must also have eyes that are open to recognise and honour the Lord in the needy all around us. We must not only have *songs of praise of our God upon our lips* – to quote the psalmist – we must also speak inspired words of encouragement and display Christ-led actions of charity in regard to those who need our comfort and our help.

The mystery of the Ascension of Christ is both a contemplative feast and a missionary feast. It calls upon us, at one and the same time, to look to Christ *lifted up, exalted, raised to great heights, sitting at God’s right hand* and to see and reach out to Him present in our brothers and sisters who most require our attention.

Sent out into the whole world to preach the Gospel, our proclamation of the Good News is to be accompanied by healing gestures... efforts to set others free and lift them up to restore their dignity.

The new evangelisation of which the world stands in need will only be lived inasmuch as Christians disclose in concrete ways the meaning and fruitfulness of what Jesus calls the *new commandment* by exemplifying His merciful, compassionate, caring love. We all have a part to play in this respect – each one of us in accord with our own particular mission and charism.

The Paschal Mystery – of which the Ascension is an integral part – is to be accomplished in our lives. What could that mean for us? Precisely what it meant – or rather what it means – for Jesus: being present to God our Father, who is in heaven, and simultaneously present to our brothers and sisters in humanity who are here on earth.

Ascending into heaven Jesus said to His disciples *I am with you always even to the end of time.*

What we see there is a double movement: presence to God and presence to our fellow human beings – not lived in tension with, and certainly not in opposition to, each other, but together, at one and the same time.

Saint Augustine writes of the Lord: *Beautiful is God, the word of God... He is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth...*

Christ is beautiful clothed in His resplendent light, sitting at the Father’s right hand, and He is beautiful in the visage in each one of our brothers and sisters in humanity – no matter how marked and blemished and even entirely disfigured the trials and tribulations they have endured in this life have left them.

The point for us to retain today is that the Paschal Mystery – of which the Ascension is an integral part – is the wellspring of the Church’s missionary nature and is meant to be reflected in the whole of the Church’s life.

It is to the extent that we keep *our hearts fixed on the things that are in heaven* – and especially upon *the One who sits as God’s right hand* – that we will be able to see our brothers and sisters as made in His image... and also, in our turn, be true signs of Christ in the world.

As Church we must always seek both to see Christ's presence and to make Christ present in everyday life.

Amen!