

Ascension of the Lord (B)
(Acts 1:1-11 / Mark 16:15-20)
16.05.2021

It seems to me that the two readings we hear on this day – the Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension – remind us of the importance of the call addressed to us to be, at one and the same time, contemplative Christians and missionary disciples.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles has us think of how the disciples were given to contemplate the Ascension event. We are told that *they gazed into the heavens as they saw Jesus being lifted up before their eyes*. At that moment they took to heart the instruction given to them: they were to await Christ's return, His coming to be with them in new way through His promised gift of the Holy Spirit. They went back to Jerusalem to await, in prayerful expectation, the Lord's coming to be with them anew. Giving themselves to prayer in the Upper Room – along with Mary and other women disciples – the Apostles prepared their hearts for the Spirit's coming to dwell within them at Pentecost. It is as if they realised that Christ's new mode of presence would be an interior reality, an affair of the heart. They knew they were called to take the path of their hearts and to prepare their souls to welcome God's gift, in quiet prayer, attuned to the stirrings and motions of God's Spirit in the depths of their being.

Today's Gospel passage has us go on to think of how the first disciples were called to take to heart – and eventually to act upon – the instruction they had received from Jesus for the moment when the Spirit would come upon them. They had been told to go forth in Jesus' name once they had been touched by God's grace in a way that would empower them for mission.

The passage from Mark's Gospel read this morning would have us hear the same call that was first addressed to the disciples as a call now addressed to us. Like those initially sent forth, we are bidden to work wonders in Christ's name, doing so in a way that manifests that Jesus' earthly ministry is now pursued by the Church – by each one of us who are called to share in its mission.

Clearly, we are meant to be both contemplative Christians and missionary disciples. The call we hear today is a call to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus as He is lifted up, while, at the same time, focused on the world in which we live, aware of the mission confided to us in its regard. Our Christian vocation is to be contemplatives animated by a missionary spirit and/or missionaries with contemplative hearts. How important it is for us to hold together both dimensions of our vocation: the contemplative and the missionary.

It is surely significant that those who have committed themselves to live a *Consecrated Life* in the Church both as contemplative men and women and as missionaries look to the same mystery we celebrate today as an expression of what each one's particular form of life is all about. Both Contemplative Religious (cloistered monks and nuns) and Missionary Religious see the liturgical celebration of the Ascension providing them with an incentive to be more faithful to their particular, complementary, vocations.

I hasten to add that the mystery of the Ascension has great relevance not only for both categories of *Consecrated Men and Women*; it has great relevance for every Christian. Every Christian is called to be a contemplative in action and a missionary with a contemplative heart.

When it comes to the mission confided to us, it is important to grasp that it is a mission which is boundless; a mission without limits. We are exhorted by Jesus to *go out to the whole world and to proclaim the Good News to all creation*. That might seem like an overwhelming task for us to undertake. It is! It was a task far beyond the human capabilities of the Eleven to whom it was first confided. It is a task far beyond our human capabilities alone.

The vastness of the mission confided to the first disciples is all the more remarkable when we consider that the initial group of missionary disciples sent forth into the whole world was made up of very ordinary men and women. By and large, the Apostles themselves were lacking any great intellectual capacity, they were ordinary men without great power or influence in terms of social status... and yet they were God's chosen instruments to spread the Good News far and wide.

The Church has pursued that same mission through very ordinary men and women in subsequent generations right down to our own day.

When I say the Church's mission is pursued by *very ordinary men and women*, I am thinking of people just like us. It is folk like ourselves who are called to pursue Jesus' mission in this day and age. We are called to be animated by the same spiritual energy as our ancestors in the faith: the Spirit of Christ-Jesus. We can and should minister, just as the Apostles did, by looking to and drawing upon the same source of strength to which they looked and upon which they drew: the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

The text from the Acts of the Apostles made clear to the Eleven where they had to begin; wherein their mission was to be grounded. They had to *wait for the Holy Spirit which would come upon them*. They had to await that gift of the Spirit *in prayer*.

What waiting in prayer for the gift of the Spirit brings home to us, along with our experience of our poverty and weakness and a sense of being overwhelmed by what is asked of us, should make us aware that the mission confided to us depends first and foremost not upon our strength, our capabilities of whatever kind (intellectual or other)... not upon our organisational skills or human resources, our genius, but upon God's grace and the insights bestowed upon us by our contemplative prayer. By *contemplative prayer* what I mean is just simple, trusting, confident prayer of the heart... a prayer which has us look beyond ourselves to the One from whom all blessings flow; a prayer that has us realise that the One to whom we pray is a benevolent God who looks upon us with the eyes of love.

Jesus assured the Eleven that they would be *clothed with power from on high*. That promise is an echo of the promise made to Mary, the poor servant girl of Nazareth, when at the Annunciation, she was told the Holy Spirit would come upon her and cover her with its shadow.

Here we have the secret to all mission: prayer! Prayer in which the Holy Spirit is given to us. Pope Francis pronounced a wonderful little phrase at one point when he said: *The Holy Spirit is the true artisan of the multiform witness that the Church and every baptised person renders in the world*.

The call I hear addressed to us on this day is a call to give ourselves to prayer – a prayer in which we contemplate the One lifted up. I advocate this not so that we might become lost in a vacant gaze, but so that this prayer might see us open our hearts to the gift of God's Holy Spirit which is showered down upon us.

We must never forget that we are all called to go forth and to act in the Lord's name, doing whatever He asks of us, for the good of the Church and the salvation of the world.

This going forth is demanded of cloistered monks and nuns as much as it is of missionaries. Just think of St Therese of Lisieux who is venerated as Patron of the Missions. This enclosed Carmelite nun never left her cloister and yet she saw and understood the world to be her mission field. Taking leave of this life, Therese declared that her mission would continue, for she would spend her heaven doing good on earth. As men given to a contemplative monastic life here at Holy Cross Abbey we are called to see that our vocation has its place in the Church's mission. We are called to be engaged in that mission at the level of our hearts; our vocation would have us hold the world upon our hearts in prayer... a genuine prayer of compassionate concern for all people.

Amen!