

Ascension A 2020 SML
MT 28:16-20

For most of the Easter Season, the Gospel readings have been taken from the Last Supper Discourse: four chapters of Our Blessed Lord's teaching what was near and dear to His Sacred Heart. He spoke about everything His disciples needed to know to survive His impending death.

Then Jesus stopped teaching, He pushed back from the table, got up, walked out into the night air and looked up at the starry sky; "He raised His eyes to heaven," and began praying. As you listen to Jesus pray so intimately to His Father, you feel as if you are eavesdropping on a conversation that was meant to be private.

Scripture scholars call this prayer that followed Jesus' teaching at the Last Supper the "high-priestly prayer," as Our Blessed Lord is praying as the high priest who was Himself the one making atonement as well as the offering, both priest and sacrifice, for us.

According to Our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, the key to a correct understanding of this prayer is the great Jewish Feast of Atonement, better known as Yom Kippur. What had been represented in the ritual acts of Yom Kippur took place in

reality, and took place definitely, in Our Blessed Lord.

In order to understand this, we must first consider the ritual of the Feast of Atonement (i.e. Yom Kippur) that is described in Leviticus chapters 16 and 23. On Yom Kippur, the high priest was required to make atonement:

- ✓ first for himself,
- ✓ then for his house,
- ✓ and finally for the whole community of Israel (16:17.)

Yom Kippur was the one occasion in the entire year when the high priest pronounced in God's presence the otherwise unutterable holy name that God had revealed in the burning bush. Hence, the object of the Day of Atonement, of Yom Kippur, was to restore to Israel, after the sins of the previous year, its character as a "holy people," to lead them back once more to their designated position as God's people in the midst of the world.

The structure of the ritual described in the Book of Leviticus was reproduced exactly in Jesus' high priestly prayer. Just as the high priest made atonement for himself, for his house, and for the whole community of Israel, so Our Blessed Lord prayed:

- ✓ for Himself,

- ✓ for His Apostles,
- ✓ and finally for all who will come to believe through their word – for the Church of all time.

The Gospel of the powerful high priestly prayer comes at a time in the Church year when it is needed most – during the time between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday, that period of ten days when the Apostles seemed to be without.

Our Blessed Lord entered the world in a way the world least expected. Aside from how Our Blessed Lord was conceived (which was truly miraculous), He entered the world, rather ordinarily, rather simply, rather quietly.

But beginning with the public life of Our Blessed Lord, in the first throws of apostolic success, the Apostles left their nets, boats and customs tables and flocked to Him as the one who would restore Israel, who would restore the throne of David. The power to cast out devils, the thrill of miracles, to companion such a noble Person Whose words took them to new inner personal heights, and finally the glory of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the Apostles certainly enjoyed a confidence in the presence of Our Blessed Lord.

But His death was real, and as a result the Apostles all

forsook him and fled, and they cowered in fear for three days, very much alone, as Our Blessed Lord had predicted they would.

Yet the days which passed between Our Blessed Lord's Resurrection and His Ascension were by no means uneventful:

- ✓ On Easter Morning, the women went to the sepulcher not to meet the risen Lord, but to embalm His body. Yet they found the stone rolled away.
- ✓ The message of an angel declared He is risen.
- ✓ When they first saw Him they thought they were seeing a ghost.
- ✓ Mary Magdalene thought He was the gardener
- ✓ The two disciples on the Road to Emmaus recognized Him in the breaking of the bread, that is, the Eucharist.
- ✓ Thomas was given the opportunity to put his finger in His Hand and his hand into His Side.
- ✓ Our Blessed Lord appeared to seven of the Apostles on the beach and prepared breakfast for them.

This year, we celebrate the joyful Feast of Ascension Thursday today. As one scholar described it, "God the Son and God the Father embrace in the Holy Spirit with love beyond all imagining. The Holy Spirit prepared His Pentecost shower of blessings for the world as if God's love can no longer be contained in heaven." It's called a joyful feast, the joyful Feast

of the Ascension, but every year, there is more than a twinge of sadness when we think about the Apostles.

I would expect the Apostles who were left behind, to be perplexed and sad. The world was unchanged, and Our Ascended Lord had left. They had received a commission that seemed impossible to carry out: “Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”

Talk about a full plate

But according to Luke, here is what really happened. Luke records that the Apostles worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem (not sad, but) with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. (24:50-53) It follows that the Apostles did not feel abandoned. They did not consider Our Ascended Lord to have disappeared far away into an inaccessible heaven. They were obviously convinced of a new presence of Jesus that is recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. **“I am with you always** until the end of the age.” (28:20) They were convinced Our Ascended Lord was still among them, in the way that only God can be close to us . . . where else, but at the table of the Last Supper from where He taught and prayed . . . from where

He gave us His Real Presence, in His Body and His Blood, in the Eucharist.

As I teach our 8th graders in moral theology, “No matter where you are in life, no matter what you are facing, good or bad, Our Blessed Lord is no further away than the closest Catholic Church.” And how blest are we that Our Lord is available in Adoration 24/7, day or night in the Adoration Chapel! Blest!

The Apostles believed in Christ’s abiding presence. They believed it so well they knew it. That’s why these days between the first Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday were not days of fear and cowardice.

They were days of joy and consolation; joy and consolation. We too experience this joy and consolation in the Eucharist, even more evident than before, since Monday, in the middle of a pandemic, when parishioners sat in their cars and watched the Mass if there is a car not blocking their view. I was talking to my sister Joanne about it the other night, and she said it so clearly. The draw is the opportunity to receive the Real Presence of Our Blessed Lord, in the Blessed Sacrament. Joy and consolation in the midst of a pandemic. We are so blest!