

Homily – Ascension – (Year C) – June 2, 2019

ACTS 1:1-11; PS 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; HEB 9:24-28; 10:19-23; LK 24:46-53

During the **Last Supper**, Jesus **prepared** his Apostles for his departure to his Father. But he also sought to *reassure* them with words that foreshadowed what we celebrate today—his **Ascension into Heaven**. Despite his words of encouragement, his friends still grieved because they knew Jesus was going to leave them. Jesus said:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (Jn 16:7, 13)

Even after hearing this, the Apostles were unable to take his words **fully** to heart, because they were thinking *“not as God does, but as human beings do”* (cf. Mk 8:33). They were focusing only on their **short-term loss** and **pain**, and not on the **long-term hope** and **glory**.

Jesus tried to show them how he was **fulfilling his Father’s promise to send the Holy Spirit** on his people—a promise spoken by multiple Old Testament prophets—by voluntarily embracing his **Passion** and **death**, which would be followed by his **Resurrection** and **Ascension**.

Earlier during the **Last Supper**, Jesus had said:

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, “I go away, and I will come to you.” If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe. (Jn 14:27-29)

How could they **not** be troubled? At that point, the Apostles didn’t have *our advantage* of knowing the wonderful effects of the **Resurrection** and **Ascension**. Jesus’ exhortation to **“not let your hearts be troubled”** was not a **command** as

much as a **reassurance**. He **knew** their hearts were troubled. He **knew** they were afraid. He **wasn't** saying, “**You don't love me**” when he said, “***If you loved me, you would have rejoiced***”. He was telling them that **they would need more love**. They would need **divine** love. And he knew that their love and their ***joy would be full*** (cf. Jn 15:11) once they received the **Holy Spirit**.

Jesus said all this, not because he was **upset with** his Apostles.

Jesus said all of this because he **understood** his Apostles.

So, he wanted to increase their **faith** and to expand the capacity their **hearts** to be able to receive the **full power of the Holy Spirit**.

And he wants to do the same with us—whose **faith is weak** and whose **hearts** also need to be **prepared and expanded** to first **receive**—and then **share**—**divine love**.

Here's the **bottom line**:

Whenever Jesus “goes away” it is always for our good, even when it doesn't feel good.

The most obvious example is **when we sin gravely**. Jesus—and by extension his Father and the Holy Spirit—completely **moves out of** a soul that is in mortal sin. He does this for two reasons.

First, because **a soul in the filth of mortal sin** is not worthy to “**house**” the Lord.

But the Lord also **vacates** a soul in mortal sin in order **to encourage us to repent and to invite him back in**. Even when we are in a state of grave sin, God's **love** never stops **rushing toward** us. It's just blocked by the sin so we can't **receive** it. But since he **created our hearts precisely for his love**, when we don't experience his love, **our souls starve**. It is our **hunger for God's love**—**recognized and acknowledged**—that propels us back into his open, **merciful** arms.

Less obvious, and often more troubling to us, is when Jesus “**goes away**” precisely **when** we are **seeking** him. I’ll illustrate with a **personal example**:

Back in March, when I was on my 30-day silent retreat, I went to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. One of the requirements of our retreat was to pray **four distinct one-hour periods of prayer**, preferably in Jesus’s Eucharistic Presence. One day, during one of those four hours, I simply could not find any interior quiet. I was **agitated, anxious**, my **mind was racing**, and I could not settle down into silent communion with Jesus, no matter how hard I tried.

Finally, after wrestling with this for a while, I said to Jesus, “**There’s a storm raging inside me and I can’t make it stop.**” Jesus said back to me, “**I can!**” and, *instantly*, the storm stopped, and I found myself in peaceful silence.

Now, when I say that Jesus spoke to me, it’s not that I heard him with my **ears**, but rather, with my **heart**. It’s one of those things that you **can’t explain** to someone who’s **never experienced** how Jesus communicates to the heart; and something you **don’t need to explain** to someone who **has**. And that’s why silence is so critically important to our spiritual lives.

Silence trains us to listen with our hearts.

If we don’t carve out times of **intentional** silence each day—where we turn off the **music**, the **TV**, the **movies**, the **video games** or **whatever other noise pollution** we use to keep ourselves constantly **drugged with distraction**—we will not know **how** to recognize Jesus’ voice when he speaks to us **personally** and **directly**.

But that’s **not** why I share this prayer incident from my retreat and its connection to the Ascension.

This is why.

Just a couple of weeks ago, when I was trying to pray before the Blessed Sacrament in our chapel here in the rectory, I once again found myself trying to pray with a **storm of agitation and anxiety raging** inside me. Recalling what

had happened two months earlier on retreat, I thought **I'd just get Jesus** to calm the storm for me. So, I told him again, **“There’s a storm raging inside me and I can’t make it stop.”** And guess what happened!

Nothing!

He *didn't* calm the storm! To an untrained **ear**—or better, to an untrained **heart**—it would have seemed that Jesus had abandoned me to the storm to let me fend for myself. But Jesus **was** there. He **did** respond. He just didn't respond in the way **I wanted**. Rather, he responded in the way I **needed**.

He didn't respond as I expected because **he loves me and wants my faith to increase**, in order to **expand my heart** to receive more of his Holy Spirit, in order to be his witness—an **“all-in, I believe Jesus’ promises”** witness—to **his Resurrection and the power flowing from it** (cf. Phil 3:10).

I must confess that **I was trying to manipulate Jesus**—testing him to see if he would give me what I wanted: **consolation**. The first time around—when I was on retreat—I had turned to him **in sincere need—desperate for his help**. That is what we call **spiritual poverty**.

This time around, I was trying to **command Jesus to command the storm** to stop, even though **I dressed up my manipulation** in the same words as before. An **examination of conscience** after this most recent incident revealed this **corruption in my heart**—my expectation that Jesus do what **I wanted** him to do—rather than asking Jesus to do what **he wants** in order to make me into what he created me to be. That is what we call **spiritual pride**.

The fact is, **in both cases, Jesus loved me and gave me what I needed**. In the first instance, he wanted to increase my **faith** in his power and his love.

It worked!

In the second instance, he wanted to increase my **trust** that he knows what I need better than I do.

It worked!

And here's the one **consistent thing** in the two incidents—**Jesus' presence**. Most obviously, Jesus was present in the **Eucharist** in the **Tabernacle of the chapel**.

But more subtly, he was also *present in his seeming absence* in the **Tabernacle of my soul**. He just chose to be present in a way that I could not detect, because he wanted me to **seek him more diligently**...on *his* terms...not **mine**.

And the result?

I realized that he loved me beyond my imagination in **both instances**. And because of that experience, I can witness much more credibly to others that Jesus keeps his promises, particularly this one:

...behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age. (Mt 28:20)

Not that Jesus' words ever need improvement—but we can **rephrase** that statement to read:

“Behold, I am with you always, *even when you don't think I am.*”

The author of an incredible spiritual book entitled—*Into Your Hands, Father*—writes:

[God] knows how fixed we are on ourselves and how inclined to make our own ego the center, even in our love. He knows that if he lets us experience his sweet presence too soon or for too long, we will become so satisfied with our love for him that we will think more about that than about him. Yes, our nature is such that God's sweetness can make us forget God. God's love for us forces him to seem to withdraw, so that our self-love and pride will no longer have a stronghold. When self-love no longer receives any nourishment, in the end it can only starve to death. Only when self-love is dead and the center has moved from the individual to God can he communicate himself without any risk involved.

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Pope St. Leo the Great now helps us see the big picture more clearly in terms of the **Ascension** of Jesus:

...the Son of Man was revealed as Son of God in a more perfect and transcendent way once he had [ascended] into his Father's glory; he now began to be indescribably more present in his divinity to those from whom he was further removed in his humanity. A more mature faith enabled their minds to stretch upward to the Son in his equality with the Father; it no longer needed contact with Christ's tangible body, in which as man he is inferior to the Father. For while his glorified body retained the same nature, the faith of those who believed in him was now summoned to heights where, as the Father's equal, the only-begotten Son is reached not by physical handling but by spiritual discernment.

<http://www.liturgies.net/Liturgies/Catholic/loh/easter/fridayafterascensionor.htm>

The lesson Jesus tried to teach his Apostles at the Last Supper was this one:

His **seeming** absence is an even **more** Real Presence—whether in the **Tabernacle of the Church**—or in the **Tabernacle of our *Hearts***.

The **Ascension** is the **big-picture** version of this...and our **spiritual lives** are the small-picture version.

St. Augustine said:

This is a great truth, that he ascended above all the heavens, yet is near to those on earth.

Nearer, in fact, than we sometimes realize!