

Ascension of the Lord -- May 24, 2020

As we and our world go through these days of dealing with the Covid 19 virus, slowly the reality is sinking in that we are going to be living with this new reality and threat for quite some time into the future. It is a difficult reality to face and pretty much all of have to pass through the usual stages of dealing with something that is difficult in our life. Some years back, the nurse, Kubler-Ross did quite a study of this in regard to working with persons dealing with serious illness in their life but they can be applied to the way that we deal with any loss in life or even the reality of a son or daughter not having the sports skills or academic skills that we would like them to have.

These stages that we go through in one fashion or other are denial, then anger, bargaining and then finally acceptance. For example, with the coronavirus we have some people in denial calling it a hoax, others are constantly looking to blame someone, others are looking for ways to guarantee that they will never be infected, and finally we are able to accept the fact that it is with us and we all have to help each other to deal with this the best we can with the gifts God has given to us.

As we deal with these issues and changes in our life today and for our future, what a grace we have as Christians in the lessons and messages that we have in today's feast of the Ascension of our Lord.

The ascension of Jesus was a big turning point in the life of the Church. As Jesus departs from this life, he now will have to rely on his followers to continue his mission.

As Jesus departs from us after his life among us on earth, he leaves his first disciples and all of us with a great commandment or commission and a great promise. The great commandment or commission is that we are to go out and make disciples of all nations, and the great promise is that he will be with us until the end of the age.

Let us look first at his great commission to forth and make disciples of all nations. Earlier I spoke of the various stages of accepting a new reality. After going through a long period in the church when we left the work of the Church or Christ to the priests and religious, slowly we are coming into acceptance and comfortableness with the reality that every baptized member of the church is called to share in the work of continuing the mission of Jesus. All of us can evangelize the world by our words and deeds. All of us can live in a way that draws others to Christ. We can bring the good news to others without calling it preaching.

We don't have to be perfect. In today's gospel we hear that as the disciples approached Jesus on the mount of Ascension, they worshipped him but also had doubts. If we have struggles and questions today, the first disciples had their struggles too, but we must open our selves to the leading of the Holy Spirit each day. If we wait to share the Gospel until we have perfect faith, we will never complete our mission.

Along this line, I was very encouraged this past week by the message of a speaker on a Christian radio station who emphasized that when Jesus called the first apostles, who were fishermen by trade, he did not say to them – go out now and become fishers of men. No, Jesus said to them, “Come **follow me**, and **I will make** you fishers of men. We don't have to figure out how to be disciples on our own power. Just **follow him** and daily he will **show us** how to share our faith and be fishers of men. I find that so helpful to remember. Nevertheless, we need to keep asking the question, how real is discipleship in life of the average parishioner in our parish? And we need to ask what we can do as a parish to help our young people and all of us to not just know the facts of our faith but be intentional disciples.

When Jesus left, the disciples they were scared, but they had three things going for them – they had three years of “in-service training” with Jesus, they had one another and they had the promise of the Holy Spirit. Believers today have the same three things and are

actually in better, not worse shape. We have the benefit of all the Scriptures that give us a better understanding of Jesus and his teachings. We have the distance of time that shows us how the faith has prevailed in spite of attack and persecution. We have the structure of the church which gives us constant in-service training, and we have the support of our faith communities and the gift of the Spirit in baptism and confirmation.

So, let us look for a moment next at Jesus' great promise to be with us always. This is probably the most comforting and encouraging word we have from Jesus. It seems a bit strange that Jesus gives us this promise at the same time that he is leaving us. However, the ascension of Jesus with our humanity to the glory of God not only enables him to be with us in a new and more intimate way through the sacraments and through each other and his presence within us, but also assures that there is a place for our humanity in heaven. Our humanity has been brought to the height of God. In the ascension, Jesus reveals the destination of our earthly pilgrimage.

In simple words, just as Christ came down and united himself completely with us through his incarnation, so we are at the same time are united with him in his resurrection and ascension in glory.

Jesus who is in God, is at the same time the perpetual openness of God to humanity. He is himself what we call heaven. Heaven is not a space but a person, Jesus, in whom God and humanity are forever united. The key is to be united to Christ in all things -- in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The head of the body, Christ, cannot be separated from its member, us. The more that we unite ourselves to him in our manner of life, the more he is present to us through his glory and through the Holy Spirit. In essence, Jesus' ascension is the beginning of his return in glory to us.

And so it is that St. Luke in the first reading does not focus on Jesus who is ascending, but on the disciples who returned to their homes, he says later on, "full of joy."

The experience of the ascension told them and us that God has room for our humanity. They experienced and we too experience that Christ is not only with us but within us with a new power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul in today's second prays that the eyes of our hearts might be enlightened to know the riches of the hope, the inheritance and the power for us who believe.

Christ has given us in his ascension a new commission but also a new promise of his presence and the assurance of return to our true home forever with God. This is the hope we need and the future that we need to keep in mind as we go through the changes and difficulties of our present day and time.

So, the question for us to think about today is – How close do we feel to Jesus? Do we have a sense Jesus is with us always through thick and thin?

A happy and joyful feast of Ascension to all of you today!