

The Ascension of the Lord – Year B
16 May 2021
“Strive to preserve the unity of the Spirit”

Today, as we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, we hear the Biblical equivalent of “famous last words.” In two of our three readings, Jesus addresses his disciples for the last time just before ascending back to the Father. In both the Acts of the Apostles and Mark’s Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples to be his witnesses, to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

Throughout the Easter season, our readings have revealed that Jesus’ disciples—including us—are called to proclaim the Good News, and we’ve learned what that Good News, what the core of our faith, is: “Christ has died, Christ is risen; so repent and be forgiven.” In today’s Gospel passage from Mark, however, we get a new twist. We learn *why* people will come to believe the truth that we proclaim. Jesus says, “These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” Scripture then notes, “they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.”

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter, Paul, and the other apostles demonstrate all but one of the signs mentioned by Jesus just before his ascension. In fact, the only sign which Jesus prophesied in Mark which is not described in the Acts of the Apostles is drinking a poisonous beverage without harm. Although we don’t find such an episode in

Scripture, an ancient tradition from Christianity's first century claims that Joseph Barsabbas—one of the two disciples identified in Scripture as a possible replacement for Judas Iscariot—was forced by unbelievers to drink a deadly potion but he survived.

There is, however, another sign, *not* mentioned in Mark's gospel, which will lead people to faith in Jesus. This sign is mentioned in Jesus' *other* famous last words—those spoken on the night before he died. At the very end of the Last Supper, the Lord prayed to his Father for all believers, saying: "I pray not only for [my disciples], but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us."

Now listen to *why* Jesus prayed for that unity: "I pray that they may be one in us, *so that the world may believe that you sent me*. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one...that they may be brought to perfection as one, *so that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me*." In other words, the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed for *our* unity—both with God and one another—so that we can be a sign to the world of God's great love.

The importance of Christian unity is emphasized in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he wrote: "I...urge you to live in a manner worthy of the calling you have received...*striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*."

So, unity—oneness—should be absolutely central to who we are as Christians. Unity is the *only* sign Jesus explicitly prayed for on the night before he died, so we might conclude that he desires Christian unity to be *the* primary sign of God’s love for the world. So, how does that seem to be working out? Has Christian unity been a shining beacon of God’s love down through the centuries? Well, tragically, no. In fact, one could make a strong case for Christianity’s abysmal failure to witness to unity. From St. Paul’s own rocky relationships with both Peter and Barnabas, to the Great Schism between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the 11th century, to the Papal Schism of the 15th century when there were three popes at one time, to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, to the radical splintering of the Protestant movement which continues to this day, Christianity has been repeatedly wounded by stunning episodes and tragic eras of disunity.

We find disunity and discord continuing in our own Church today. Prominent citizens profess their Catholic faith while actively fighting against core Church teachings and values. Conservative, progressive, and orthodox Catholics alike all resort with increasing frequency to uncharitable criticisms of each other. From the Vatican all the way down to our own parishes, our failure to demonstrate unity as a Church is a profound *counter*-witness which weakens our testimony before the world, a world which sees our collective disunity as a sign—a sign of untruthfulness. When we dare to proclaim the truth, that Jesus Christ *is* the truth, the world’s retort is the same as Pilate’s to Jesus on Good Friday, “What is truth?”

We dare not underestimate the tragic significance of Christian disunity. To help us realize the gravity of the sin, consider what St.

Cyril of Jerusalem said about unity in the fourth century: “All who receive the sacred flesh of Christ are united with him as members of his body...He is the bond that unites us, because he is at once both God and man...We may say, following the same line of thought, that all of us who have received one and the same Spirit, the Holy Spirit, are united, both with one another and with God...Just as Christ’s sacred flesh has power to make those in whom it is present into one body, so the one indivisible Spirit of God, dwelling in all, causes all to become one in spirit.” Think about that for a moment. This means that when we succumb to the temptation of disunity, we are in a direct tug-of-war with God, acting directly contrary to God’s will, seeking to unmake the sacramental unity which Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit create among us.

Given the ongoing tragedy of our disunity, it seems as if Christian unity would actually be even more of a miracle than healing the lame, driving out demons, or raising the dead. So, what, if anything, can we do to foster unity? How can we help to heal the rifts which divide us? We start by taking responsibility—confessing our contributions to disunity in the past and promoting Christian unity in the future. Of course, many of the divisions among Christians are historical and global, and we may feel there’s no way we can help to repair them. But as the old saying goes, “Think globally, act locally.” That means we need to promote unity first and foremost within our own parishes. We do that by reining in our tongues, muting our criticism and gossip, giving folks the benefit of the doubt, encouraging rather than discouraging our ministers and fellow parishioners. We promote unity by seeking to master the art of forgiveness, and by acknowledging that we are *all* united—in being flawed and fallible human beings. In today’s

second reading, St. Paul identifies virtues we can foster to diminish discord and promote unity. He says, “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, strive to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.”

Now, pride was the primordial sin which led to the banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden, so perhaps the most important virtue in Paul’s list is humility. So, if we truly wish to fulfill the mission Jesus gave us just before he ascended, if we wish our unity to be a light for the world and a clear sign of God’s love for us, as Jesus himself prayed, we might want to start by actively fostering our own humility—acknowledging that our thoughts, our feelings, our agendas, our critiques, our preferences, and our contributions to parish life are not the only ones or the only way; they may not be the most important, profound, needed, or charitable. As we seek to foster personal humility, then, consider Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where the Apostle provided some grace-filled advice on the subjects of Christian unity and humility:

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory, rather humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others.” If we seek such humility in the service of unity, then we can at least begin to fulfill Jesus’ famous last words, “I pray that they may be one in us...so that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.”