

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” wrote a bitter French journalist. He was making a very sad observation about what happens when we try to improve things. There is so much good will, so many serious attempts, so much energy employed to change this world, yet at the end, things come back to their own order. Equality doesn’t last, friends walk away, alliances break. The oppressed become oppressors, the idealists create technocratic systems that suffocate freedom. We come back to our most shameful addictions. One great Czech writer described this helplessness of ours as “the unbearable lightness of being.” The stoics in ancient Rome thought if that’s the way things are, then it’s better not to get involved with the world too much. Because nothing really lasts. Nothing is really serious.

I bet thoughts like these were crossing the minds of the apostles when they went up the mountain to see their Lord go away. They would definitely cross my mind. Like every farewell, the scene of the Ascension has this hint of emptiness and futility. We worked so hard, we experienced so much, we walked together through the madness of the Passion to the ecstatic joy of Resurrection. And now, there’s nothing left. Just goodbye. After all, he is God, and we are humans. And he is going to the Father, and we are staying here. “The more things change...” - you know the rest.

Except not this time. Actually, everything changed and it changed for good. Returning to the Father is not farewell. By the act of Ascension, Christ establishes a new way of being together with us. “I will be with you always until the end of time.” This new way is so deep and so powerful that staying in the body, even the grace-filled, transformed body of the risen Christ, would be an obstacle. This form of presence can be fully expressed only through the enormous energy of the Spirit -- the gift of the Father and the Son. The One who is united with the Father and the Son.

The Ascension of Christ changes everything. Since the moment the Son entered the world through his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, the world has been permanently changed. Now it is opened to receive the gift of the Spirit. We can receive him directly, as if we were equal to Him. Prayer (talking with God!) becomes possible for every human being. Sins can be forgiven. Small gestures like offering of bread and wine, like pouring water on a baby’s forehead, like hopeful promises exchanged by a young boy and a young girl, like an aromatic oil put on the forehead of a dying patient -- these become sacraments because they are much more than just human gestures. They are acts of God; they are gifts of God. All of us can see these gifts with the eyes of faith. What really happens when we go to mass, receive communion or anoint hands and foreheads is that we become part of the reality that is bigger and much more powerful. The reality that is eternal. We start living the life of God. We start praying the prayer of the Spirit. We respond with the love of the Son. Something eternal and unchangeable becomes a daily practice of temporal humans. This is how God fulfills his promises. This is how far the Father is ready to go when his children get lost and wounded.

You might ask me, how do I know it? When the change is so enormous and so definitive, it takes us a long time to realize its depth. Only small things are immediately noticed when they change. Real enormous change takes time, a very long time, to be realized. Remember when

you found a new restaurant, discovered a new dish, or bought a new car? You realized the change immediately. But nothing really changed. You still went out to eat, you still kept driving - a car is a car after all. Deep down in your heart, you knew that very soon you will be searching for another change. The big change, the real one, takes time. How long did it take you to realize that you were not a child any more, that you have to take care of things? How long did it take you to realize that you are truly a husband or a wife to your spouse? How long did it take you to realize that you are a parent? All of those things take a long time, years, maybe. And yet these are very common, natural changes. Imagine the really amazing change: when our broken and lonely soul is reconnected to the vibrant, beating heart of God. The heart that is life and that gives life. To realize and live the depth and the consequences of this event can take a whole lifetime, or maybe more. But one thing is for sure: it is real. And it will never stop.

“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.  
Go, therefore, and make disciples of all 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.  
And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”