

HOMILY ASCENSION 20 MAY 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

During my brief tour of duty spent in the Lord's service, I've had occasion to minister to folks coping w/ untimely deaths: either they are facing death at an early age, or they're laying to rest a beloved who has left this world too soon. These experiences have impressed upon me the tenuous character of the human hold on in this world. Life is very fragile. The slightest interruption in the regular rhythms of existence can prove fatal. Now the Lord's departure from the earth at the Ascension may strike us yet another untimely exit. In fact, it seems to have struck his followers as such. I'm guessing that's why they were standing there looking at the sky after he left. They had been hoping he was going to restore the rule to Israel; so they probably didn't foresee that he was just going to up and disappear.

So it makes sense to ponder the point of Jesus' departure, that is, his ascension. A key to the puzzle lies in a cryptic verse in Paul's epistle. It reads: The one who descended (that is, Jesus) is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. The risen Lord leaves this world because it cannot contain him. The epistle tells that the risen Christ is exalted above the highest heavens and fills the whole universe. So the departure of Jesus from this visible sphere does not mean that he has abandoned the world; rather, he has adopted a new mode of engagement with it.

The Lord who has ascended into glory is still very much present and operative on this terrestrial plane. He is most alive and active within the temple which is his Church. And so both the gospel and epistle, right after mentioning the Lord's ascension, speak of his work through the ministers of the Church: Paul lists apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers who build up the body of Christ; Mark tells how the risen and ascended Lord works with the disciples just as he predicted he would.

I would draw just a couple lessons for us here and now from these considerations about there and then. For starters, the fact that the risen Lord is still very much alive albeit invisible should confirm our hope for loved ones who have passed from this life. Those who have gone before us are not really gone, if you will. They have gone to God in Jesus. Our beloved deceased are with the risen Lord. And in him they are still accessible to us; in the language of old time religion, the faithful departed constitute the Church suffering and Church triumphant, even as we the living comprise the Church militant. They have not disintegrated into annihilation. They are in a different mode of existence, a state of being more akin to that of the risen Lord than that of the present life. We pray for them, they pray for us, and together we hope for an everlasting reunion in the Father's house.

Secondly, I haven't mentioned what could be called the missing link between the ascended Christ and the vivified Church. This missing link is the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit is the

divine force which enlivens the Christian community and empowers her preaching and sanctifying apostolate. Without the Spirit, the Church cannot act, indeed, she cannot live. And so in that brief interval between the Lord's ascension and Pentecost, the entire assembly of believers gathered in fervent prayer to be clothed with power from on high. I think their conduct to be exemplary for us. In our day and age, we sense Jesus' absence w/ greater intensity. We dwell in a secularized society where religious symbols are fading away: Nativity scenes, the Ten Commandments, and crosses have been cast out from public venues; those who don religious garb and make religious gestures meet w/ ambiguous reactions on Main Street. And the scandalous failure of some Churchmen has highlighted the gap between the sinless Christ and the imperfect ministers who represent him. This difficult moment should be for our faith community a period of intensified prayer for the coming of the Spirit. For it is the Spirit of Pentecost who animates the Church, who revives her in times of decline and encourages her amid adversity. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.