

May 9, 2021

Father Ed's Sunday Reading

(continued)

In the sky above Palestine? But not above New York, Beijing, New Delhi, or Rio de Janeiro? Or does heaven wrap itself around the whole world? We can begin to see how ridiculous things can get.

Fundamentally, heaven is not a place at all. It is our definitive relationship with God, just as hell is the eternal severing of that relationship. 'Heaven' is where God is; and to be with God is to be 'in heaven'. And that is what Ascension says: Jesus is totally and forever reunited with the Father. The actual words of Acts are that "a cloud took him from their sight". Now a cloud in Scripture is very often a symbol for God, so the expression means that God the Father took his incarnate Son back to himself. And that is also the meaning of Mark in today's Gospel that the "Lord Jesus... was taken up into heaven".

Jesus' resurrection has three aspects in the Christian Testament:

- a. Jesus, after dying on the cross, enters into new life, "never to die again".
- b. He is exalted, he is raised up to share the same glory with his Father, God.
- c. This also results in an outpouring of the Spirit of the Father and the Son on his people and their receiving a mandate to continue the work of Jesus, the building of the Kingdom.

Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit form a "seamless robe", one single movement which, in some ways can all be seen in the climax on Calvary as Jesus totally emptied himself and offered his life to the Father on the Cross at Calvary. But this one many-faceted event has, in the Christian Testament, been teased out to cover the seven weeks between the Jewish feasts of the Passover and Pentecost.

So, at Easter we emphasise the resurrection, the passing of Jesus through death to life. Today, on the feast of the Ascension, we remember more the "exaltation" of Jesus, as he is raised up to share equal glory with his Father. We are not here really speaking of two separate events separated by 40 days, a time-frame which is only found in the Acts of the Apostles. It is not even in Luke's gospel although traditionally he authored both works.

In the narratives given in the readings of today's Mass, Jesus, before he leaves his disciples, gives them their mission. Jesus, who confined himself to the people of Israel, tells them to continue his work all over the world. They will be able to do what Jesus himself could not do. "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12). They will be able to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

And, in our day, beyond the wildest dreams of those early disciples, the pope, or indeed any Christian, can today proclaim the Gospel through satellite to every television set or radio in the world. And, at the rate our information technology progresses, who knows what further evangelising opportunities will be

available to us? (And, as an aside, can we really say we are taking advantage, even remotely, of the facilities for preaching the Good News which are available to us?)

There are four aspects to this mission which Jesus gives in today's Gospel:

a. There is the duty of the Christian community to evangelise, that is, to communicate the life vision that is contained in the Christian Testament and especially the Gospel. It must be stressed that this is not simply the responsibility of the clergy or of religious men and women. It is the duty of every single Christian, arising from the very nature of being a disciple. The world is still under the influence of a Europe which was once totally Christian and where evangelisation was understood as the clergy keeping a passive laity "in the state of grace". We no longer have such a world not even in Europe.

b. The church has the task of healing. The Christian is not simply concerned with the "soul". The whole person needs to experience the effects of salvation – in spirit, mind, feelings, body, and in the surrounding environment. Jesus himself spent a lot of time healing the sick. It was often linked with the healing of the soul and of the heart and the reconciliation of the sinner. The disharmony which sin is can have very visible effects on the feelings and on the body. It is not enough simply to remove the sin (by going to confession) nor is it enough simply to try to heal the body (by going to hospital). Healing involves the whole person. That, as Christians, we are all called to do.

c. Jesus promises that the Spirit will give power to his disciples. This is not to be political or economic power. Again it is not a power simply vested in the hierarchy. It is the power, shared by all, that comes from a vibrant vision of what life should be. It is a special power that comes from a heart that can give people strength in times of weakness, hope in times of fear or despair, a power that, above all, gives meaning to life in all situations.

d. Finally, the Christian community does not do this alone. "I will be with you always, to the very end of time," is the promise of Jesus. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us. Through his Spirit, Jesus continues to work with and through his people. And so we firmly believe that he is to be found in every one of us. In some way, Jesus is to be found in every single person. "As often as you did (or did not do) it to one of the least of my brothers, you did (or did not do) it to ME."

In every single person we encounter we can:

– either come face to face with the presence of Jesus, because of that person's sheer goodness, love, generosity, compassion, courage, concern for others...

– or see someone who is deeply in need of the touch of Jesus because of their evil or inappropriate behaviour, their hates, resentments, their violence, or on the other hand, their weakness, sickness, loneliness, despair...

This lovely feast of Jesus' Ascension reminds us that we, too, will have our resurrection, when God "will raise our mortal bodies and make them like his own in glory...when every tear will be wiped away...(when) we shall see you, our God, as you are."