

## **The Ascension of our Lord    Cycle A    June 1, 2014**

What emotions were stirring in their souls as they watched Jesus being taken up from them? What did they feel when he finally disappeared beyond their sight? We can only imagine. But one thing is clear. Jesus' physical presence has been removed from this world. In his risen body Jesus has been elevated to heavenly glory. Earlier, he had tried to prepare his disciples for his departure: "I will return to take you with me, so that where I am you may be too." Hopefully, one day Jesus will take us up to join him too.

The text raises a very compelling question which we can take as also being addressed to us. As the disciples gaze upward toward Heaven long after Jesus has been taken out of their sight, their contemplative reverie is interrupted: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up toward heaven?" As if to say, you have spent enough time in contemplation; now it is time to do some work!

The Ascension is clearly a turning point. St. Luke wants to tell us that now that the earthly ministry of Jesus has come to an end, the work of his Church must begin. Jesus himself defines the work: "You will be my witnesses..... to the ends of the earth." Jesus will now be present in a new way, through you and through me.

Jesus showed what he is looking for from us by the example of his own life, through acts of compassion and mercy. He loved us first, as St. John tells us. He loved us to the end. And Jesus commanded us that we love one another, that if we would be his friends, that we live his gospel of love carrying out such corporal works of mercy as of feeding the hungry, quenching the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, giving alms to the poor. He declared that the ultimate judgment upon our lives will be based upon how we have loved or failed to love him in the least of his brothers and sisters. When it comes to love, we don't need to look for grand gestures to make. It is the simple ordinary acts of kindness and mercy that present themselves to us every day as opportunities to love that we can seize hold of. As

St. Therese of Lisieux put it, "We cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love." Pope Francis in our time has picked up on the theme of mercy that so marked Jesus' public ministry. Francis sees the Church as "a field hospital after battle." It is not a bad image. Just look around. Watch the news. Read the headlines. There are broken lives all over the place. "The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful."

There are also the spiritual works of mercy: offering gentle correction, giving solid instruction, providing good counsel, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries and praying for the living and the dead.

In the Gospel today Jesus tells his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.... and teach them to carry out everything that I have commanded you." Just as Jesus had made them his disciples, so now they in turn are entrusted with the work of teaching and handing on everything that Jesus has imparted to them and making new disciples for life in the Kingdom. Teaching the young and modelling for them how to live as disciples of Jesus is a spiritual work of mercy and a great service to the young. "Those who instruct many in virtue will shine like the stars of heaven" [Dan 12,3]. Teaching others to remain faithful to the teachings of his Church and not to pick and choose what we like, and discard what we don't, this is great spiritual work of mercy in a world where so many are confused about the faith and what they should believe and how they should live. Jesus said, "I am the way, the life and truth." Jesus understood that we all have a right to know the truth.

In a world where the needs are so great and so many, we often feel that we are quite powerless to do very much by ourselves alone. But actually we are not alone. If we look around we will find other like-minded people with whom we can collaborate to make our world a better place for all. If you would like to help the poor, you might consider getting involved in the St. Vincent de Paul; if you are seeking a richer spiritual life, you can look into a bible study group or Christian Community Living. They are all up and running here in the parish. You can offer to volunteer your time and talent for a good cause, or get interested in politics or

find your niche in life to make a contribution to the common good. We are never really alone. Don't have to be. This is precisely the point that Jesus makes in the very last line of the Gospel where he tells us, "And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age." Jesus has ascended to the Father, yes, yet mysteriously, even paradoxically, he remains with us to the end of time. He will not abandon us. We are doing his work. He will surely help us do it.

Jesus is with us now as we celebrate the Eucharist. In a world where some prefer to speak of the absence of God, the Eucharist is a powerful sign and assurance that Jesus is with us still. As with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Actually, it is Jesus himself who presides over every celebration of the Eucharist, and so the Eucharist that we celebrate today is really a participation even now in the heavenly liturgy. To be one with Jesus now and to be one with Jesus forever, this is the desire that the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord awakens in us today.

Paradoxically, the more we keep our eyes fixed on this goal, the more likely we are to dedicate ourselves to this world, to its sufferings, its struggles, its sorrows, its hopes and its dreams. Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Pope John Paul II and others who made the greatest difference in the transformation of the world were those who fixed their vision heavenward. Prayer, worship and contemplation may not seem to some people as being very productive, but for those who practice them they are an endless source of inspiration and hope for that new world yet to come.

As we celebrate Eucharist today, we do so with the children who are making their First Holy Communion today. "The Eucharist is the Sacrament of love; it signifies love; it produces love" [St. Thomas Aquinas]. It is given to us that we might love like Jesus. Let us ask the Lord Jesus to enlighten our minds so that we may know what work of love and mercy He would have us do during this coming week. Let us ask Him to enkindle his fire in our hearts that we may have the desire and the will to do what He tells us. And let us pray that we never lose sight of the goal of one day going and being with Jesus forever.

**Father Neil**