

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Solemnity of the Ascension

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Ascension Parish, Halethorpe/ Dedication of the New Altar

May 28, 2017

First of all, let me say that things have changed quite a bit since I last celebrated Mass here at Ascension. Thanks to your careful planning, your generosity, and your love, and thanks to the wonderful leadership of your pastor, Fr. John Williamson, this church has been transformed beautifully with a handsome new altar as the focal point. I also thank you for working so closely with Father Williamson in order to unite Ascension Parish and St. Augustine Parish in a single pastorate. I deeply appreciate your openness, hospitality, and spirit of cooperation. Warmest thanks and warmest congratulations for all you have accomplished.

It is also joy for me to celebrate Mass here, on this your feast day, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. The Scripture readings speak of the Lord's disciples as a work-in-progress; they speak of the greatness of the Exalted Lord's power on our behalf; and they speak of the mission that has been entrusted to us. Let's briefly look at these three points.

The first point, then, is that, like the Apostles, we are a work-in-progress. Think about the situation of the Apostles. They had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. He chose them, called them, and befriended them. They heard him preach and witnessed his miracles of healing. After his death, the Risen Lord appeared to the Apostles - instructing them about the Kingdom of God and encouraging them. Yet even at the moment when the Lord prepared to ascend into heaven, the Apostles were still not free of confusion and doubt. They were concerned about the liberation of the Kingdom of Israel from Rome; Jesus was concerned about the Kingdom of God which his Apostles were to preach to the ends of the earth. And not only were the Apostles confused, they also entertained doubts about Jesus. The Gospel tells how the Risen Lord summoned them to a mountain in Galilee - the place where his mission on earth had begun in earnest - After all he

had been through with his Apostles, we are told that they worshipped him, yet some doubted.

We'd like to think that after more than twenty centuries, confusion and doubt would have been eliminated from our midst. Yet, like the Apostles we all too readily substitute our plans and priorities for God's. We easily lose track of what is important in God's eyes, and what is not, as we make our way in a noisy, competitive, and rapidly changing world. And sometimes, in the midst of it all, we too entertain doubts - even though the Lord has drawn near to us in a thousand ways. Perhaps our confusion and doubt is the Lord's way of telling us that, left to our own devices and resources, we are incapable of discipleship. Rather, like the Apostles, we must watch and pray, asking that the Holy Spirit, whom we received in Baptism and Confirmation, to be stirred up in us. As we look ahead to next Sunday's celebration of Pentecost, let us pray that we will experience the presence and power of the Spirit in our lives, perhaps as never before, with a new depth and vibrancy.

This brings us to a second point - the greatness of God's power for those who believe. So back to the Apostles . . . In the midst of the Apostles' mischance and confusion, the Risen Lord ascended into heaven, vanishing from their sight. Even as they gathered in the Upper Room to pray for the Holy Spirit, they must have wondered what the next stage of their lives would be like. How could they possibly bring the Good News to the ends of the earth? Where would they get the enlightenment? Where would they get the strength?

In today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians we get a preview. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ poured out upon the Apostles a Spirit of wisdom and he enlightened the eyes of their heart. With the coming of the Spirit, the truth and beauty of the Gospel dawned on them. They understood, at long last, what Jesus had tried to teach them. And as their hearts were enlightened, they received strength from on high. In truth, they tapped into the surpassing greatness of God's power by which the crucified Lord was raised from the dead and exalted at God's right hand. They began to see that the Ascension did not signal Jesus' absence but rather a new and powerful presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we wonder where we will get the light and strength not only to follow

Christ ourselves but also to spread the Gospel to others. Yet we too can celebrate the greatness of God's power on our behalf and the living presence of the Lord in our midst through the Holy Spirit. Pope St. Leo the great, in a 5th century homily on the Ascension, taught that "the visible presence of the Redeemer has passed over into the Sacraments." In other words, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Risen Lord is present to us in all the Sacraments, and most especially, the Holy Eucharist, the Mass. This how the Risen Lord comes into our midst, into our hearts, into homes -and wants to live in us, speak through us, and accomplish his mission through us. That's why it's so wonderful that we're consecrating a new altar in this church today! For it is upon this altar that the One Sacrifice of Christ is offered day after day, upon this altar that bread and wine become the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord, and from this altar that we receive the strength of Christ in the Holy Spirit to be the Lord's disciples and witnesses in the midst of our daily lives.

Thus the Risen Lord is sending us on mission, a mission of evangelization. Even if we don't feel quite prepared for it, not quite properly formed, doubtful about our chances of success, hesitant to engage others about the faith, the Lord is telling us, as he told the Apostles, "You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth." So too, as Jesus was taking leave of the Apostles, he instructed them, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations . . ." Some are called to venture into distant lands as missionaries, and we can only admire the courage and self-less joy of these men and women. Yet all of us in every vocation and state of life in the Church - all of us are summoned to participate right here at home in the Church's mission of evangelization.

This means making the Gospel known through the witness of our words and actions, but more is being asking of us than simply this. In our prayer, both public and private, we need to tap into God's surpassing power, revealed in the Exalted Christ and communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. Encountering the Lord in Word and Sacrament, we must undergo what Pope Francis calls "a missionary conversion" - such that we will share the joy of the Gospel with others quite intentionally - and not merely as individuals but also as a community of faith, worship, and service. In other words, our parishes too must undergo a missionary conversion as we seek to reconnect those who, for whatever reason, are

unconnected with the Lord and with his Body the Church

So we bless and dedicate this new altar, may we Holy Spirit descend upon us so that, with the eyes of faith, we may behold the Exalted Lord, and then worship and receive him so as to proclaim him!

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!