

Solemnity of the Ascension 2015

Introduction

It's a joy for me to celebrate Mass here at St. Alphonsus today, especially on the Solemnity of the Ascension. Please accept my warmest thanks for your spirit of fidelity and service especially for the poor and needy well beyond the boundaries of the parish. You are ably and lovingly led here at St. Alphonsus by Father Joe Lacey and I am delighted to join with you in expressing our common thanks for his dedicated service as your Pastor!

I ask your ongoing prayers for the City of Baltimore, especially its most disadvantaged neighborhoods. For the moment life has returned to "normal" but for far too many residents "normal" means many systemic problems like unemployment, drugs, failing schools, and a crumbling family structure. The cable news cameras have pulled out for now but we as Church must remain and strive to make a real difference.

An Article of Faith

Dear friends, every Sunday, as part of our profession of faith, we say of Jesus: "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." When we profess this truth or listen to Scriptural accounts of the Lord's Ascension, what does it mean to us and to our lives as followers of Christ? One way to answer that question is to go back to Easter Sunday when St. Paul said these words to you and me: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. [He goes on:] Think of what is above, not of what is on earth" (Col. 3:1-2). The fact is, our Easter faith is not complete until we strive to understand in faith the meaning of the Lord's Ascension into heaven, and to this task let's dedicate the next few moments.

'It Is Better That I Go'

Throughout the Easter season, we've heard how the Lord appeared to his disciples after his Resurrection. The disciples were amazed and filled with joy to encounter the Risen Lord yet they still had many doubts, misunderstandings, and fear. In the verse just prior to today's reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus rebukes them for their hardness of heart and their slowness to believe.

As long as the Lord remained with the disciples in a visible, physical way, it seems they felt the gravitational pull of going back to the way things were. We read, for example, how Peter, James, and John had returned to fishing when the Risen Lord appeared to them on the seashore. In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, some disciples still thought that the Risen Lord would free Israel from its Roman occupiers. So Jesus told his closest followers that it was better for them that he go, so that they would receive the promised Holy Spirit, the Advocate. For unless the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit they would never fully grasp all that Jesus had taught them; nor would they really open their hearts to the radical newness of his Risen Life. And without the Holy Spirit, the disciples would lack the courage and strength to preach the Gospel to the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, performing the signs and wonders that confirm God's mighty love.

But Where?

But if Jesus were not going to some far corner of the cosmos, where *was* he going? If we answer, "He is going to 'the right hand of the Father'" we'd be correct. But what do we mean by that phrase, "the right hand of the Father"? When, as a child, I first learned about the mystery of the Lord's Ascension, I thought it meant that Jesus rocketed to some far flung star beyond our solar system and maybe that is still the mental image we form of this mystery. Yet, in ascending, Jesus did not go to some distant place. Rather, he ascends so as to enter into the mystery of God, but now bearing our humanity redeemed at the price of his blood. The Risen One goes to His Father: the Creator and Master of all space and time. For that reason, Jesus' departure signals not his *absence* from us but rather a new way and powerful way of being *present* to us, not merely in Jerusalem or Bethany or Emmaus, but in every place and in every time, here in Maryland, in our place and time, 2,000 years later. Thus, Jesus keeps his promise to remain with us until the end of time.

As the Lord disappeared from view, the disciples gathered to pray for the Holy Spirit. Doing so, they must have been convinced that the Lord remained with them; otherwise they would have all gone their separate ways. When the Holy Spirit came, they were indeed filled with the presence of Christ but now with a new power and a new joy beyond anything they could have imagined. They viewed the Lord's commission to preach the Gospel everywhere not as a mission impossible but rather as a mission glorious, a mission to which they would give their lives as witnesses, as

martyrs.

Like the Apostles and the first disciples, Pope Francis reminds us that the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord is the foundation of our faith. God made the world as a space where we might know and love him. Because of sin it became instead a place of confusion and sorrow where, in every epoch, it often seems as if no place is left for God. Jesus, the Son of God, assumed our flesh and came to redeem the world. He nailed our sins to the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. In ascending Jesus retains our humanity and brings it to the Father's right hand, opening up in the Trinity "space" for our humanity, so to speak, making room for us in the very heart of the Godhead.

Making Room for God in Our Hearts & in Our World

What, then, should the Ascension of the Lord mean for us? Well, the world was created to be a place for God's truth, beauty, and love but throughout history we have done our best to crowd him out. Now the Lord has made room for us, for our humanity, in the heart of his Godhead. Does not the mystery of the Ascension challenge us to make room for Christ and his Father in the depths of *our* hearts? Jesus said, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23).

Jesus ascended into heaven not so as to separate himself from us but rather so that he might dwell in our hearts with new intensity and power. In Baptism and Confirmation he bestows on us the gifts & fruits of the Holy Spirit, so that our hearts might be continually be enlarged, purified, and made joyful. In coming to us sacramentally, the Lord asks us to open up our hearts, not that shabby little room in our subconscious we seldom visit but the central hallway of our hearts, adorned with grace, virtue, beauty and love.

And once our hearts become a dwelling place for Christ in the Spirit, we become equipped to make room for God in the secular culture in which we live. We do this by living the Gospel joyfully, by serving the poor in some personal way, by worshipping wholeheartedly, by strong and loving family life, being ready to give an account of faith in places like parties and dinners where the Church sometimes becomes the subject of conversation. In all these ways and you can continue the work

of making space for God in our world, that space which Scripture calls, “the Kingdom of God”.

On this feast, let us then ask for the grace to follow the Risen Lord unreservedly from sin to grace and from grace to glory where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father in majesty to intercede for us. May God bless us and keep us always in His love!