

# Solemnity of the Ascension

## Introduction

Today, dear friends, we celebrate the mystery of the Lord's Ascension into heaven. The Ascension is an article of faith that we proclaim every Sunday in the Nicene Creed when we say, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." When we profess this article of the Faith or when we listen to the Scriptural accounts of the Lord's Ascension, what mental image do we form? Do we think of the Lord as rising above the stratosphere and embarking on an intergalactic journey beyond the stars? Do we think of "the right hand of the Father" as a distant place? A place that is inaccessible to us earthly creatures?

The feast of the Ascension is a grace-filled opportunity for us to ensure the soundness of our faith in the Lord Jesus - who died on the Cross, rose from the dead, and now is exalted at God's right hand. This is our moment to understand what St. Paul meant when on Easter morning he said to us: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth" (Col. 3:1-2). Indeed, our Easter faith is *not* complete until we shed our doubts and misgivings about the meaning of the Lord's Ascension into heaven and it is to this task we will dedicate the next few moments.

## 'It Is Better That I Go'

Throughout the Easter season, the Church has opened for us the Scriptures which tell us of the Lord's appearances to his disciples after his Resurrection. The disciples were amazed and filled with joy to encounter the Risen Lord yet they were still beset by doubt, misunderstanding, and fear. In today's Gospel, St. Matthew takes us to the mountain near Galilee where Jesus had gathered the Eleven disciples, and he adds: "When they saw him they worshipped, but they doubted."

It seems that as long as the Lord remained with the disciples in a visible, physical way, they were prone to misunderstanding and doubt. They experienced gravitational pull of trying to go back to the way things were. Peter, James, and John had returned to fishing when the Risen Lord appeared to them on the seashore. Some of the disciples still remained optimistic that the Risen Lord would free Israel from its Roman occupiers and restore the throne of David to its former glory. No

wonder Jesus told his closest followers that it was better for them that he go, so that he and his Father would send them the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. For unless the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit they would never fully grasped all that Jesus had taught them; they would never really open their hearts to his living presence among them; and they would not have the wisdom, courage and strength needed to preach the Gospel in the hostile atmosphere of the Roman Empire.

### **But Where?**

But if Jesus were not going to some far corner of the cosmos, where *was* he going? We would answer, “He is going to ‘the right hand of the Father’” and we’d be correct. Dear friends, the Risen Lord ascends not to a distant place but rather he ascends so as to enter into the mystery of God, bearing our humanity. The Risen Lord goes not to some far-flung star but to God the Father who is Creator, Lord and Master of every place that exists. 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 Baltimore, here in this Basilica, in our place and our time, 2,000 years later. Thus at the end of today’s Gospel, the Risen Jesus says to us, “And behold, I am with you until the end of the age” i.e., until the end of the world.

Even as the Lord disappeared from view and the disciples gathered to watch, wait, and pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, they must have been convinced that the Lord remained with them, otherwise they would have all gone their separate ways. Yet when the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles, they were filled with the presence of Christ 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 very lives as witnesses, as martyrs.

What the disciples understood and proclaimed is that in ascending to the Father, Jesus, the Son of God who assumed our flesh so that he might die and rise for us, retains his humanity forever and has brought our humanity to God’s right hand. Having made the world, for all its sinfulness and confusion, a space where the truth and the beauty of the Gospel might take hold, Jesus now brings our humanity into the heart of God, opening up in the Trinity, as it were, “space” for our humanity, for

us who believe.

### **Making Room for God in our Hearts**

What, then, should the Ascension of the Lord mean for us? We say that Christ first came in the flesh and we pray or at least we try to pray that Christ will come at the end of time. But what about the time in between, the time in which we live, the span of our lives? In Christ God has made the world a space for his truth, beauty, and love and he has made space for our humanity in himself. 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).

In an Advent homily, St. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks not only of the first coming of Christ at his birth and not only of his second coming of Christ at the end of time but rather of a *third* coming of Christ, into our midst, into our hearts, each day. 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, with the abundant graces, gifts, and fruits of the Holy Spirit so that our hearts might be enlarged, purified, adorned by divine love, and thus made fit for the Kingdom of God. It is in being transformed by God's love in the power of the Spirit that we are also equipped to be the Lord's witness in the world, to continue the Lord's work of making space for God's truth and love in a world that seemingly grows more distant each day from the God who loves it so. It is in being transformed by God's love in the power of the Holy Spirit that we will cherish the hope that where Christ has gone, we too will follow.

For while we do not see with the eyes of flesh the visible presence of God, we know and we believe that the Risen Lord remains with us, that the power of his love does not diminish with the passage of time, that his mercies do not fail but rather are new every morning. They resound anew, morning by morning, in the Word proclaimed. St. Ambrose could exult, "I find Thee, Lord, in Thy mysteries!" And Pope St. Leo the Great could proclaim, "the visible presence of the Redeemer has passed over into the sacraments!" - most especially the Eucharist, the true Body and Blood of Christ. And how we often we sense the presence of Christ in souls that are holy, in great saints, and in souls that poor and needy, in situations that cry out for love of God that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

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!