

Solemnity of the Ascension Year “C”

June 1-2 2019

Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

While I respect the fact that some people prefer not to observe birthdays, I myself, cannot imagine seeing it as anything other than a happy day, no matter what the year might be. It is another year of grace, another year of experience and hopefully, a year of wisdom. When it comes to Church feasts however, I can see why the disciples may never have envisioned the Ascension as a day of joy and feast. After all, it represented the day that they were left on their own, no longer able to converse daily with the bodily Risen Lord. It had to be a bittersweet day.

The observance of today’s feast is of great antiquity. Although no documentary evidence of it exists prior to the 400 A.D., Saint Augustine says that it is of Apostolic origin. For centuries, artists have tried to give visible witness to the account of Sacred Scripture. Today’s Feast is no different. There are many paintings of Jesus floating up heavenwards, supported by jubilant angels, and even some that show only his feet remaining, sticking out of a cloud.

It is difficult to criticize the artists because this entire event is hard to picture given our limited intellects. We come face to face with our own limitations, grasping to encapsulate this mystery. When some have felt called to predict the end of the world, calling forth the rapture, they have been wrong. They conveniently change the date based upon further reflection. In the account from Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1:11, after the Lord ascends out of their sight, the angels ask why the disciples just stand there, staring into space. But in truth, as Jesus ascends, he tells the disciples to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, but not passively.

As my own family of origin grows older, we begin to see that we are losing contact with the generation ahead of us, as slowly but surely, relatives are being called home to God. I anointed my only remaining uncle just the other day. His future is in God's hands. Yes, a new generation also comes forward, but the transition is becoming clearer with each passing year. We are losing links with our childhood and youth.

So, what about the Ascension? Can this feast be one of joy for us even when on the face of it we have lost our visible link with Jesus? It seems impossible to picture the apostles without some real sadness on this day. Yet his Ascension to his Father's house is precisely the place to which we have been called, and the place in which our faith teaches us that we will be reunited with the heavenly host praising God endlessly. It is a temporary separation, and for God's faithful people, so is death. It is not the end. In short, we should not feel abandoned:

Thus, reflecting upon this Feast, Saint Augustine could write:

"He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven..." (*Sermo de Ascensione Domini*, 98, 1-2)  
It is a most humbling realization that one day we must all exit this life.

We know this intellectually, but do we truly want to deal with the reality? Are we willing to embrace our true calling to an eternal life beyond the clouds? The Feast of the Ascension reminds us not only that our true home is in heaven, but that we shall approach these gates in simplicity and humility.

We will hear chanted today at the Communion Antiphon: "Sing to the Lord who has ascended the highest heavens, towards the East, Alleluia." He will not leave us orphans: Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in this morning's first reading, telling us, "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Saint Augustine wisely reminded the people in his writings: “While in heaven he is also with us; and we, while on earth, are with him. He is here with us by his divinity, his power and his love. We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by divinity, but in him, we can be there by love.” In this we find the pathway to our true and eternal home. Let us go there rejoicing, grateful that He has shown us the way.