

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD "C"
JUNE 1/2, 2019

What's your mental image of the Ascension? An image for me comes from the television series "Star Trek" where "Scotty" would "beam up" someone to another realm as their body suddenly transformed into cells of light later to reassembled whole again in another place.

Somehow I don't think that's what St. Luke was thinking about as he wrote the last words of his Gospel—although being "beamed up" in a ray of light might come close to what Jesus' Ascension looks like in our imaginations.

However the actual event of the Ascension took place, Scripture, Church doctrine, and today's liturgical observance do not focus on the "how" of the Ascension but on the missionary challenge given to the Apostles and us from it.

In St. Luke's Gospel the Ascension is situated on Easter Sunday evening immediately following Jesus's encounter with Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus where he explained all the Scriptures that referred to him; his being revealed to them in the "Breaking of the Bread" (the celebration of the Eucharist); his subsequent appearance to Peter and the rest of the early believers gathered in Upper Room in Jerusalem where he also eats with them; and finally, the journey to Bethany where he disappears from their sight in his Ascension.

I'd suggest three points, or spaces, which the Risen and Ascended Jesus opens up for the Emmaus travelers, the other Apostles and us today.

First. Jesus opens minds to the message of the Scriptures. American humorist Garrison Keillor states that the Easter Season is the time when Christians ask themselves two questions: *"Do I really believe all this stuff? And if so, why do I live this way? What changes to my attitudes, values, and lifestyle do the Scriptures especially the Gospel call me to? How different would my life be if I saw and interacted with other people through the eyes, ears, heart, and hands of Jesus, in my involvement in the political debates of the day, the conduct of my professional or business life, with my family, fellow parishioners?"*

Second. In addition to opening the disciples' minds (and hearts) to the Scriptures, today's Gospel and reading from Acts contain the "**Great Commission**"—"Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. Be witnesses of these things". The Gospel is not a museum piece, something displayed and admired, but never acted on, something for an "in group" only. *It's tempting to see salvation as solely a personal even private matter, "Accepting Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior", my ticket to heaven."* But "*be witnesses of these things*" means *get out into the nitty-gritty of the world with the faith*. Recall Pope Francis' looking at the shoes of the Jesuit novices I cited recently. Am I willing to get my hands dirty, my shoes scuffed up in carrying the Gospel? Or do I play it "safe"? The commission of Jesus is "catholic" in the literal definition of the term--expansive, inclusive. The "Gentiles" previously considered 'others' by the nation of Israel are now to be included in the Gospel's call to repentance and forgiveness of sins. In the practice of the faith, in my understanding of the Church, do I have a list of "insiders" and "outsiders"—and if so, who and why. And, what about systems of injustice, in our world, culture and, yes, Church? Surely Jesus cares about this too and sends us to call others and ourselves to repentance. Deliverance from captivity includes both freedom from personal sin and liberation from systematic injustice.

Third. Jesus was carried into heaven. But, as he departs he tells his followers in today's reading from Acts to prepare themselves to be clothed with "power from on high", Jesus's and the Father's gift of their Spirit in which we will be renewed next Sunday at Pentecost. It is a power and presence infused into us that transforms us. *As Jesus ascends St. Luke tells us he leaves "blessing" the disciples and us.* Jesus chooses to trust the work he began to us, who can be faith filled and committed but also capable of bumbling the gospel and the mission. It's two thousand years later and we haven't destroyed the church yet despite ourselves at times! And we won't. Because God is God and we are not. We are trusted with the mission begun in Jesus but it is God who gives us blessing and power from on high. It is enough for us to bless God in return through the way we live our lives as we journey through this world to our own Ascension Day of transformation into heavenly glory in Jesus.

2 June, 2019
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