

By now we've probably experienced all of the commentary there is to be written or spoken about the “non-event” of the “Rapture” two weeks ago on May 21st. Yet for all the ridicule the failed prediction received one parishioner astutely observed, “Perhaps it gave us all an opportunity to reflect about God, our life's values and choices, and our ultimate destiny. If it did that, it served a good purpose.”

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we have St. Luke's recording of the Ascension. At the end of the account we are told the apostles were left perplexed as they gazed to the sky into which Jesus had vanished. No doubt like those who put faith in Reverend Harold Camping's biblical mathematical calculations regarding the return of Jesus the apostles were left wondering, “What happens now?” Earlier in the story Jesus told them that it is not for them to know the time that God will bring the work of the Kingdom to fulfillment, but that they would receive divine power and presence through an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the work Jesus now entrusts to them. They are to be Jesus' “witnesses” beginning in Jerusalem, and from there to every corner of the earth. In the gospel we heard what traditionally is called “The Great Commission”. In it Jesus makes specific just what the work of the apostles and all who come to believe in Jesus through their witness consists in. Jesus commands the apostles to go into the world, and baptize all nations in the “name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” assuring them that as they do so “I am with you until the end of the age.”(Mt. 28) St. Matthew sets his account of the Ascension in Galilee. Galilee in northern Israel was the border between the land of Israel (the promised people) and the the pagan, Gentile world. The message is clear—the apostles are to take the gospel beyond the borders of comfortability. The Kingdom and the Church is not to be a cozy “family affair” of like-to-like, or a local cult, but a world-wide community meant to embrace people of every race, language, culture, nation and time.

Pope Benedict XVI notes that the Ascension expresses our belief that in Christ our human nature already has entered into the inner life of God. Unlike adherents to the idea of “rapture” which sees heaven as something outside of this world, the Ascension

proclaims, the Holy Father asserts, that, “man has found an everlasting place in God. Heaven is not a place beyond the stars, but something much greater Heaven means that man now has a place in God. ... Christ, the man who is God and eternally one with God, is at the same time God’s abiding openness to all human beings. Thus Jesus himself is what we call “heaven”; heaven is not a place but a person And we go to heaven and enter heaven to the extent that we go to Jesus Christ and enter into him. In this sense, “ascension into heaven” can be something that takes place in our everyday lives.” (*Benedictus: Daily Reflections by Pope Benedict XVI*, Magnificat/Ignatius Press, May 14.)

Like the apostles and the other original eyewitnesses, today we are given “The Great Commission”. The popular name “Mass” which we give to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist is an abbreviated form of the Latin verb “missio” from which we derive the English noun “mission.” The purpose of the Eucharist, of the Holy Mass, is both to deepen our “indwelling” in God through faith in Jesus as well as equipping and strengthening us for his mission. In the revised Roman Missal, the book which contains the Scripture readings and the other prayers of the Mass which we will begin using on the First Sunday of Advent in November, the pope has approved two new dismissal formulas that explicitly speak to this dimension of the Eucharist. Soon we will hear the deacon, or priest, following the blessing at the end of the Mass bidding us “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” or “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”; our “Great Commission”.

Witnessing to Jesus takes as many forms as there are people. And while words are important, even more is the witness we give by the day-to-day example of our lives wherever people encounter us. How will each of us witness our on-going encounter and union with Jesus in each Mass to someone each time we celebrate it? For some people the only Bible, the only church, the only Jesus they will ever encounter will be you or me.

We celebrate Jesus’ assurance, “I am with you always” and once again take up his commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations.”