

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD “B”      MAY 19/20, 2012

We humans have bodies. We also are bodies. This weekend’s celebration of the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven invites us to accept the rich but often ambiguous paradoxes of being body-persons.

We experience our bodies as limits, but at the same time they are opportunities to be real and engaged in the world. Our bodies are our self-revelation to the world; but they often conceal our full reality. We can experience them as objects of study and we can discipline them when we learn to walk or dance or play a musical instrument. At the same time they are glorious revelations of our self-knowledge, in art and science, or in a beautiful union of the physical and the spiritual when we become the music we play or the athletic moves we master. Our bodies humble us in their creaturely dependency, and they are our glory when they reveal our transcendence.

The ambiguities of being embodied persons have led some people over the ages to propose a dangerous dichotomy. Why not be one or the other: either a mere body, a thing, or a disembodied “soul” freed from our humble physicality. Some forms of Christian piety succumbed to such dualistic thinking. They proposed that when it comes to life, it is our “soul” that is most important, the body being its prison and daily human life a constant battle to “put down” our bodies and everything associated with it. Such dualistic thinking, a product of Greek philosophy, was unknown to the authors of the Bible and Jesus. For the Scriptures, the human person body and soul is a unity, and it is in and through this unity that we are “the image and likeness of God.” In the course of centuries, the Church has condemned as heretical any such teaching that would deny this fundamental truth. Yet, in some quarters of the Church even today, it persists as we hear talk of “saving our souls” over and against active engagement in the world through kingdom building with our bodies. One way such a tradition is expressed today is in the popular expression, “I’m a spiritual but not religious person.”

In both the Apostles Creed which we have been using during this Lenten and Easter Season as well as in the Nicene Creed which we use on the other Sundays and great feasts of the church year we state unambiguously “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

Today's celebration of the Ascension of Jesus proclaims that we are saved and glorified not apart from our bodies, but in and through them. Pope Benedict XVI states: "He, the eternal Son, has taken our human being to the presence of God; he has taken with him flesh and blood in a transfigured form. Man finds a place in God through Christ; the human being has been taken into the very life of God. And, given that God embraces and sustains the whole cosmos, the Lord's Ascension means that Christ has not gone far away from us, but that now, thanks to the fact he is with the Father, he is close to each one of us forever. Each one may address him familiarly; each one may turn to him. The Lord always hears our voice."

While we have not yet experienced the fullness of Jesus' transfigured humanity of which the Pope speaks, through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation we already have been given admittance into it. And we are called to recognize, celebrate, and grow it in the context of our bodies in this world, not by attempting to run away from life or the world, but through active engagement with it. At death, our bodies, like that of Jesus, will bear the marks of our own passion, and they will also have been the means by which we already have tasted the joy of the resurrection. Whenever we encounter and are moved by beauty in any of its many forms—a sunrise or sunset, the grandeur of the mountains or the ocean, a painting, a piece of music, or experience the depths of love in relationship with another person, or know deep in our being peace, or a profound sense of unity with God, all people, and all of creation—we have had a transfiguration/ascension experience, a bit of heaven on earth. And this through our bodies.

The Preface for today's Mass states it well: "Mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of hosts, [Jesus] ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following where he, our Head and Founder, has gone before."