

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD “B”

MAY 16/17, 2015

Today’s celebration of the Ascension of Jesus is about both leave-taking and the beginning of a new nearness.

The Ascension was the last appearance of the Risen Jesus. The disciples knew they would no longer see him in this world. This departure is not to be compared to that of Good Friday, when Jesus apparently failed and all previous hopes appeared to have been greatly mistaken. Jesus’ departure in the Ascension, in contrast to Good Friday, has something triumphal and reassuring about it. Jesus has indeed gone away, this time not into death, but into life. He is not defeated. Rather, God has justified him. Even as his physical presence in this world disappears, St. Luke in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles proclaims two ways in which this departure is, in fact, the beginning of a new (and continuing) nearness of Jesus with the disciples and us.

First, St. Luke tells us that Jesus revealed himself in the forty days after the Resurrection to the eyes and ears of the disciples by explaining to them the things of the kingdom of God. In every Mass we, too, experience this self-revelation of Jesus in The Liturgy of the Word the highpoint being the proclamation of the Gospel for which we stand at attention. While the word of God is mediated to us through the person of the reader, the deacon or the priest, it is Jesus himself present and speaking to us through the Holy Spirit. In our private reading, reflection and prayer with the Scriptures, Jesus speaks a personal word to us.

Along with explaining the word of God St. Luke tells us that the disciples experienced Jesus being with them during these days “while meeting with them”. Other translations render these words as sharing a “common meal”. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in reflecting on this passage cites another translation that renders the Greek literally as Jesus having “eaten salt with them.”

Salt/sodium is a necessary mineral in maintaining human health. While too much salt we know can cause an imbalance and lead to detrimental health issues, too little in our lives can also have detrimental effects. When I was working construction on the railroad as a college and seminary student during the summers, on really hot and sultry days my late father who was the foreman of the work gang, insisted we all consume a salt tablet before setting out to work to compensate for the sodium we'd lose working in the hot sun.

In the desert climate of the bible salt was offered to guests at one's home as a sign of hospitality. As Pope Benedict notes, in "eating salt" with the disciples, sharing a meal, Jesus was offering the disciples hospitality, a hospitality more than a friendly greeting at the door, but a hospitality that was an invitation to enter into relationship and participation in his own life. Salt, as we also know, is a preservative that counteracts decay, counteracts death. Whatever this mysterious phrase may say, the intention is clear: the disciples knew that Jesus and his good news were no longer something external to them, but now a life within themselves. In another place, Jesus speaking of salt says: "Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves, and you will have peace with one another" (Mk. 9:50). In the Liturgy of the Eucharist in every Mass, Jesus sits down and "eats salt" with us, offers us hospitality, communion in his life. If our faith and life are to prosper and grow, if we are to remain spiritually healthy, resist temptation, resist becoming dehydrated spiritually, we too need to "take salt" take and keep Jesus into our life.

Secondly, in his being taken up in the Ascension, St. Luke notes Jesus simultaneously initiates his continuing nearness by extending his hands and blessing those gathered. In the act of blessing he disappeared, physically. At the same time, the hands of Christ are the ceiling that covers us, protects us from all the power of evil as he states in today's Gospel. The blessing hands of Jesus open the door of the world to which is above. In blessing Jesus departs; but the opposite is also true—in blessing he remains. He blesses. He himself has become a blessing: "I am with you always" (Mt. 28:20). The disciples leave the Mount of Olives not as those who have been abandoned, but as those who have been blessed and would continue to be so wherever they went. So, us, too.