

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension. Our Gospel and first reading today are taken from the end of the Gospel of St. Luke and the beginning of The Acts of the Apostles. St. Luke's narrative of the life of Jesus and the beginnings of his Church are recorded in two books of which the Acts of the Apostles is his second volume. Like any good author, he recaps in the beginning of the second work what happened at the end of the first. So, both of these readings give an account of the Ascension, when Jesus left earth and returned to his Father.

We heard in the first reading that Jesus' Ascension into heaven occurred forty days after his resurrection. But if you have been counting, this Sunday is the 43<sup>rd</sup> day of Easter. The 40<sup>th</sup> day of Easter was last Thursday. Some of you may remember that this solemnity has been referred to as Ascension Thursday. So why are we celebrating Ascension Thursday on the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter? There are various reasons why the Church transferred the solemnity to Sunday, but the one that seems most pertinent is that it provides an opportunity for more of the faithful to engage with the significance of the solemnity. Because the solemnity is celebrated on Sunday more of us will be encouraged to reflect on this truly important event. So we ask, what makes the Ascension so important?

The Ascension is one of the most ancient articles of our faith. It is found in both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed which date back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and is also addressed in the writings of the early Church Fathers. Aside from the fact that it is the climax of Jesus' life here on earth, it is also a prerequisite for the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost which we will celebrate next Sunday, *"if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you"* (Jn 16:7) Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of John.

But more importantly, the Ascension is an integral part of our salvation. Beginning with the Incarnation, the divine Son of God set aside his divine glory and took on our human nature. He became just like us. And when he ascended into heaven he did not shed the human nature he received from us but took it with him. As a human being, Jesus entered into the Holy Trinity and in doing so his human nature became divine and glorified. It is important to reflect on this for it has profound implications for us. For one, it is a prelude to how we will one day, after we are raised from the dead, be brought bodily into the divine life and *"share in the divine nature"* (2Pt 1:4).

Too often we view the Ascension as simply when Jesus went away, leaving us on our own, a "goodbye Jesus, hope to see you again someday" attitude. But that is a flawed understanding of the Ascension. The Ascension is not the end of Jesus' work of salvation, his going away, it is a beginning of a new stage in his plan.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus, addressing the focus of his plan, said: *“the kingdom of God is among you.”* (Lk 17:21) He was establishing the kingdom of God here on earth. While he was with his Apostles, he trained them to carry on his work of building up that kingdom after he was gone.

It’s interesting to look at his final interaction with the Apostles. Because they had experienced his resurrection, they now knew clearly that Jesus was the true Messiah. They asked him if he was going to do what the people of Israel commonly expected of the Messiah, *“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”* (Acts 1:6). You may have noticed that he did not actually answer the question they asked. His response is intriguing because it reveals something about his plan. It was not for them to know when, it is for them to receive power and to witness. The coming of the promised kingdom had already begun, they should not worry about the timing, but concern themselves with spreading it to the ends of the earth.

Jesus did not leave his Apostles alone to fend for themselves. He promised to be with them always. In the Ascension he assumed his position as leader of the life of the Church, directing his Apostles, through the Holy Spirit, in the continuation of his work of salvation. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide them and give them power to do what he had done.

We likewise should not worry about when the fullness of the Kingdom of God will come, because it is already among us and we are already part of it. And like the Apostles we are called to continue to build up that kingdom. Neither does he leave us alone. We too have been given power in the Holy Spirit to be witnesses for Jesus, here and now, and to the ends of the world.

The Solemnity of the Ascension anticipates the Solemnity of Pentecost, when God poured out his Holy Spirit to give the early Church power. The gift of the Holy Spirit also gives us power to witness for Jesus. Some of our youth celebrated the sacrament of Confirmation last Friday. Their confirmation, and ours, commissions us to be witnesses for the Kingdom of God. We, as apostles filled with the Holy Spirit, have the privilege of participating in Jesus' work to bring about the reign of God on the earth.

However, with that privilege comes responsibility. If we are to witness we must know our faith. If we are to know our faith it must be formed. For most of us faith formation began when we were young. However, it does not end just because we have reached some level of maturity. In fact, as we get older, our faith formation should become more personally important. Instead of others teaching us we, must seek to learn through our own efforts of study, reflection and prayer. At a minimum we should always have a ready answer if someone should ask what or why we believe.

In the Incarnation God became man and took on our human nature in Jesus. In the Ascension Jesus took that human nature with him to heaven where it became divine and glorified. In doing so he has given us access to heaven. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: *“He precedes us into the Father's glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever”* (CCC 666). And St. Augustine said that because Jesus ascended to heaven we are already in heaven with him even though this has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

The Ascension has changed everything for us. May our realization of its significance bring us great joy and hope, and may we, with the Apostles, praise God continually.