

Ascension - A
Acts 1:1-11;
Ephesians 1:17-23;
Matthew 28:16-20
Little Flower - 5/24/20

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. When those of us who are older were young, Jesus' Ascension was always celebrated on Ascension Thursday, the 40th day of Easter, the day which today's first reading from Acts identifies as the day on which Jesus actually ascended. For those of us in grade school, it was also a free day, the last free day before the end of the school year.

Each of the three readings approaches Jesus' Ascension from a different perspective. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Jesus' Ascension into heaven. First, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon them and empower them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. At the same time, however, he told them that it was not for them to know when God's kingdom would come.

After Jesus had finished speaking, *"as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight."* Although the image conveyed a physical distancing between Jesus and the apostles, it also conveyed an experiential separation. In other words, the apostles' experience of Jesus would be very different from what it had been. They would experience Jesus as we do: in the Eucharist, in his Word, in others, and in his Spirit living within and among us.

Most relevant to us today, however, are the final words of the angel: *"Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven."* The message to the apostles was that Jesus was now entrusting the Church to them. The last two weeks I have mentioned the early Church's adaptability. The process of adaptation can never stop. Change is an essential part of the Church if we are to remain faithful to our origins and to the purpose for which we exist. This will be even more true for the Church and for us as we move forward from the coronavirus.

Today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians explains the theological significance of Jesus' Ascension. In today's second reading, Paul talks about God raising Jesus from the dead, seating him at his right hand in the heavens *"far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion"* and putting *"all things under his feet."* When Jesus ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of God the Father, we believe that he became Lord of heaven and earth, empowered to send forth the Holy Spirit and to judge the living and the dead.

Finally, today's Gospel points us forward. Evangelical Christians often refer to Jesus' words in today's Gospel as the Great Commission. Jesus' commission has three parts: first, *"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,"* second, *"baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,"* and third, *"teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."* The order is important. We first have to be evangelizers, then we have to welcome new Christians into the Church through baptism, and finally we have to help them develop and live their faith.

My brothers and sisters, the two stories of the Ascension in today's readings remind us of two important truths. First, in the reading from *Acts*, we are told that the apostles had questions. In the Gospel, we are told that they had doubts. Questions and doubts are part of life. With everything that has happened the last couple of months, all of us have questions and doubts. However, if we wait for certainty in our lives, we will never accomplish anything worthwhile. In the face of questions, doubts, changes, and new challenges, Jesus' promise in today's Gospel should give us the courage and the strength to adapt: *"And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."*