

Ascension - B  
Acts 1:1-11;  
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13;  
Mark 16:15-20  
Little Flower - 5/16/21

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. Forty days after Easter Jesus ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of his Father. The Ascension is part of Jesus' Paschal Mystery, i.e., Jesus' passage from death to life through his cross and resurrection, his return to the Father, his glorification at the right hand of his Father, and his sending of the Holy Spirit in anticipation of his final coming in glory.

The first reading is the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, which is the continuation of Luke's Gospel. At the Last Supper in John's Gospel, Jesus said, "*But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you*" [Jn. 16:7]. At the Ascension, Jesus promised his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they would be his witnesses near and far even to the ends of the earth.

The description of Jesus' Ascension is important. According to Acts, Jesus "*was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.*" Although Jesus' Ascension was described in spatial terms, it meant that he would no longer be present to them as he had been since his resurrection. In fact, in the pre-Vatican II liturgy, as a dramatic sign of this separation, the Easter candle was extinguished immediately after the Gospel on Ascension Thursday.

The reading from Acts tells us that the apostles were looking intently at the sky as Jesus was ascending. Suddenly two angels appeared to them and said, "*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.*" I have always interpreted this to mean that Christians cannot be star gazers. Christians cannot be passive. We cannot sit around waiting for Christ's return in glory. Christ has entrusted the Church to us, which means he has charged us to carry on his three-fold ministry in the world today, i.e., to teach, to sanctify, and to lead.

Mark's description of the Ascension begins with Jesus' mandate to his disciples: "*Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.*" This is Mark's equivalent of what is called the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel. We, who are the Church, are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the whole world. For most of us, this means that we are called to proclaim the Good News to all with whom we come in contact, especially the marginalized and those on the margins, and to support the Church's outreach throughout the world. Jesus then tells them that signs will accompany those who believe. Although Jesus described dramatic signs, for most of us, the signs will not be all that dramatic. They will be found in the quality and consistency of our lives. If we live authentically Christian lives, our lives will confirm our beliefs and words.

My brothers and sisters, today's reading from Ephesians suggests three important ways we can give witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. First, we are called to live in a manner worthy of our calling, i.e. to live lives of humility, gentleness, and patience, "*bearing with one another through love.*" Second, we are called to strive "*to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*" All of us are called to be healers and reconcilers, to tear down walls and divisions, and to build bridges in our personal lives, in our parishes, and in our communities. This is what is most challenging today. There are divisions within families, within parishes, within the Church, within cities, states, and nations and among nations. Finally, we are called to identify and develop our gifts in order to discern the way or ways in which God is calling us to proclaim the Good News to all creation.