



Reflections on the Word

This year, as the Universal Catholic Church celebrates the *Year of the Priest*, we have invited various priests of the Archdiocese of Toronto to reflect upon the Gospel of the third Sunday of each month.

Reflection for the Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord

The first verses of today's first reading [Acts 1:1-2] connect the book of Acts with the Gospel of Luke, and show that the apostles were instructed by the risen Jesus [vv 3-5]. The disciples were anxious for answers. They asked, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They thought "the promise of the Father" would bring about an age of political sovereignty such as the nation had enjoyed under the reign of King David. But Jesus' answer made clear that this is not what the promise is all about. Neither would the promise give them a glimpse of the end times, for "it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set" for the end of time. The promise was not going to make their lives easier by restoring political or national dominance or by granting divine insight. When they received the Spirit they too, would be baptized in fire. They would be empowered to take on the role of Christ: to teach and to nourish and to serve; to be ignored, to suffer and to die for him.

Present in a thousand places

In his "ascension" Jesus made a commitment to the earth that we live in. His footprints are not etched for tourists to view in the stone beneath us. But they are visible in the hearts of those who follow him. As he gave up the ability to be present in one place, he gained the capability of being present in a thousand places. When Jesus vanished, he filled the earth with the presence of God. God's presence is still here and is available for us as the ultimate fulfillment of all our dreams. We know that we move towards heaven to the extent that we approach Jesus. Through us, Jesus wants to become even more present, especially as his Church.

The Lessons of the Ascension

Through his ascension, Jesus shows that clinging to him in time and history serves no purpose. Nor does he cling to the human beings around him, unwilling to let them go free in order to continue their Gospel mission. Rather, his whole life, death and resurrection teach us to accept everyone and everything as a gift, on loan to us.

It is not good to cling tightly to relationships or to hoard earthly treasures. Today let us learn to revere all that we have with deep gratitude, and hold everything in open hands. During our times of prayer, let us open our hands and surrender all the important treasures and relationships of our lives to God. Let us be aware of our feelings toward others, and toward the things we have. Let us spend time expressing our gratitude to God for each gift and relationship.

The full significance of the Ascension reminds us that Christ accepts our lack of self-confidence in ourselves. Jesus accepts the shadowy and dark areas of our humanity. He accepts our capacity for deceit, betrayal, greed and power. And having accepted us, he calls us, gives us the eternal commission to be his people, and sends us to serve him and love him, in spite of ourselves and because of ourselves.

On the day of his Ascension, one might conclude that Jesus removed himself into a new form of divine exclusion. The case is exactly the opposite. In God, Jesus is "here" in a new and very specific way. Only in his physical separation from the historical scene can his spiritual union with all the world for all time be complete. Jesus left the world one day in order to be available to all people throughout all time. He had to dissolve bonds he had made with his friends, in order to be available for everybody. In Jesus, the future has already begun!

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