

Power From On High

In the name of our risen and ascended Lord, dear friends Christ: Few things in life as difficult as saying “good-bye”. As much as we look forward to seeing our loved ones who live distant, as much as we enjoy the happy times we spend together with them, and even as much as we may be ready for our visits with them to end, no one looks forward to that uncomfortable few moments when you stand face to face knowing that, for now, your time together is done. You search for the right words to say, but they never seem to be adequate. Then there’s the final embrace if they’re real close or the handshake if they’re not, the last wave, and then a silent prayer asking for the Lord’s protection for their travel and safekeeping, “*Until we meet again*”. And then comes what you’ve been dreading: the inevitable ache of emptiness. It’s a sad feeling of longing and being incomplete, which, depending on the closeness of the relationship, makes it a while before you feel up to facing your daily routine with full vigor.

And that’s the way it ought to be when we say good-bye to someone we love. But then we read in today’s Gospel lesson, that having said their good-byes to Jesus, the disciples “returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*”. Surely, these poor fellows are confused. They were crushed when Jesus was taken from them the first time in death. Then they were beside themselves with joy when he appeared to them after his resurrection. Now that he’s left them again, you’d think that they would be stricken with at least a little sorrow; but no, instead we’re told that they acted as if their team just won a national championship. We’re left asking, “Why? How is it that the disciples are celebrating Jesus’ departure? How can they see his going away and leaving them as something to be happy about?”

I ask because I wonder if today we share their enthusiasm. I wonder how many of us see the Ascension of Jesus as something worthy of celebration. Wouldn’t it be better for us if he had never left? —If he had just stayed around after his resurrection to continue to teach and heal, and maybe give us some of those “*many convincing proofs that he was alive*”? Don’t we all feel just a little sad or incomplete that Jesus has gone away? So, what is it that the disciples found so cheerful in the Ascension? This morning, I’d like to focus on the answer to that question so that we can share some of their great joy in Jesus’ “good-bye”.

It turns out we don’t have to look very hard to find the source of the disciples’ gladness – it’s found in all three of today’s readings, and it can be summed up in just one word: *power*. That’s what the Ascension is all about. More specifically, the Ascension is about the *transfer* of power; first to Jesus Christ, and then to us in his Church. This transfer of power has to do with a fundamental change in the way the Lord Jesus is present with his disciples.

In the forty days following his resurrection, Jesus appeared many times to his disciples. And each time when he left them, we’re told that “*he vanished from their sight*”. Suddenly he’d show up and talk to them for a bit, maybe share a meal with them or something, and then just as suddenly as he appeared – poof! – He’s gone again. So, what I’d have you see is that in these forty days, Jesus had already begun to change the way he was with the disciples. No longer did he confine himself to the physical limitations we have as humans like he did before his resurrection. By doing so, he was teaching his disciples that in his resurrected body he’s not bound by time and space. But now, in his Ascension, he doesn’t just vanish from them like he’d been doing. Instead, by visibly rising into the sky before them, he wants them to understand that this is something different again. There is something terminal about this exit. The surprise

visits were going to be over. He wanted them to stop expecting him just to pop in for a quick word – and yet, at the same time, he had just taught them that he could be anywhere and everywhere he wanted to be.

And that's key, because when Jesus ascended to the right hand of God's throne, Paul tells us that *God put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all*. What he's saying is that Jesus ascended to receive the power and authority he deserves, and that he didn't really leave his disciples; but rather from that time forward, he was going to be with them in a more universal way – a way that would allow him to share his power with them.

You see, in the Jewish way of thinking, God was present in his temple in Jerusalem. That's where you had to go to find him and worship him. It was the seat of God's power on earth; but now, as he was directing the Gospel to be carried to the nations, he had to make it clear that Christ the Lord is present with all his power and authority *wherever* his church is in the world. And that's great news for us, because it means that Christ is here now sharing his power with us.

What kind of power? Well, first there is the power to understand the Scriptures. In this morning's Gospel, we're told that Jesus had to "open the minds" of his disciples so that they could comprehend what was written. Sitting on this side of the church's wall, we sometimes forget that to the world at large the Bible is a closed book. The non-believer can read the Bible and learn the words and the stories on a superficial level; but without God's power and the illumination of the Holy Spirit he can never understand the message. To him it all sounds like long genealogies, endless accounts of battles and bloodshed, and mythological sounding stories of the interaction of an angry and capricious God with his unbelievably faithless and thankless people. But to us has been given the power to understand. Our minds have been opened. When we read the books of Moses, or the prophets, or the psalms, we see that they are all about Jesus Christ. Specifically, we see that they are all about the Lord God reconciling the world to himself by the suffering, death, and rising to life of his Son.

In the Ascension we have also been given the power to witness to others; that is, through the words we speak, we can convey the power of understanding to others. This is not just explaining things like you might teach a person how to operate a piece of machinery. In a case like that, the person you are teaching has the inherent capacity to understand you – at least, you hope he does. But in the case of the Scripture, the person without Christ has no ability to grasp the message apart from the power of God's Holy Spirit working through the words we speak. And the message we speak is itself the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the *power of God* to create faith and turn people from sin and death and give them life and salvation.

And that leads me to another power we have been given in the Ascension: the power to forgive sins. We can look at this two ways. On one hand, externally, our Lord has given us the authority to release people from the guilt of sin. We can free those whose consciences are burdened by telling them how Jesus died to take away the sin of the world and proclaim them to be forgiven in his name. This message has the power to grant peace to troubled souls. It's not just a band aid or a nice pep talk that makes people feel better; it's a cure. On the other hand, internally, our Lord has given us the power to forgive from our hearts those who have hurt us by their sins. All the grudges, ill will, and bad feelings we harbor against people who have offended us, we can let go of by reflecting on the mercy God continuously shows to us and thereby receive the power to truly forgive them from our hearts.

There's more: in the Ascension we are given the power to receive the promise of the Father, which is the Holy Spirit and all the gifts he brings with him. These are the gifts of faith, hope, Christian love, Christian liberty, prayer, the ability to discern sound teaching, the will to do good works – all of these things are impossible to us apart from the power we have been given from on high; power we were clothed with when we received the Holy Spirit.

And through the Spirit, we have been given the power to remain here in the world for now. It's a hostile environment for us. On top of all the routine problems that accompany life here on this fallen earth, we Christians also have to struggle with sin and temptation from within, and the attacks of those who are opposed to Christ from without. To defend us from these attacks, Christ has called us into his Church, which is his own body, and he gives us the power to remain steadfast in faith and hope. He does this through our worship together, our hearing his Word, and our receiving his own body and blood in Holy Communion. These are quite literally the lifeblood of Christ's body, the Church, supplying the parts (you and me) with what we need to survive, and carrying away and discarding our guilt and sin.

Finally, in his Ascension, we have been given the power to ascend with Christ. We know that our time here in this world has an end, and that one day Jesus will return in the same way that he left. He will come to lead us to where he has gone – not by any new power that he will give us at that time; but by the power he has already given us to rise with him in his Ascension.

So, as much as we may hate saying "good-bye", hopefully you can see now why Jesus' "good-bye" is reason for us to rejoice. He didn't leave us with that feeling of emptiness that normally accompanies the departure of a loved one. Instead, his Ascension marks a transition from his presence with us in a local, confined, and limited way, to his presence with us in a greater, all encompassing fullness. It is in this fuller presence that he is able to share with us the power he received when he said "good-bye" and rose to the right hand of God's throne. And that's as it should be, because the word "good-bye" is originally a contraction of the phrase "God be with you". Jesus' good-bye in his Ascension is exactly that: it's so that he, your God and Savior, can be with you at all times and in all places and give you his power from on high. That's something worth celebrating. To him be our thanks and praise forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!