

Ascension – 2020A

A hodgepodge of thoughts runs through my mind when I think of the Ascension, and this hodgepodge, I confess, makes for a dull homily: a little teaching, a little statistical information that you should know and a little challenge. That's it. I'll do my best to not bore you to death.

I start off by observing, considering how Jesus was treated the last week of his life; that he was probably happy to move on. Now he could take it easy, so to speak, and sit quietly at the right hand of the Father until Judgment Day. I think also of the nervous disciples asking if he was going to restore the kingdom soon, because this mismatched, less-than-perfect bunch are not sure they can hack it alone and, without Jesus, they might as well go home.

But then I reflect that the Ascension does not close the chapter on Jesus or his followers; far from it. Jesus' promise is that he not only actively continues to intercede for us, but also, through the gift of his Pentecost Spirit, he lives in and among us, his disciples, in every age. After all, why else would he reply to Paul, stricken on the road to Damascus and asking the vision who are you? "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Jesus? He was dead and gone as far as Paul was concerned. But Paul soon learned that, in fact, in persecuting Jesus' followers, he was persecuting Jesus himself. There was a connection, a bond, an intimacy, an enduring presence. That's why Paul would later write to his converts and remind them that they are of the Body of Christ, such was the close unbreakable identity between Jesus and his followers.

This powerful presence of Jesus and his abiding Spirit reveal the fundamental reason why the church has endured throughout the centuries. It has survived, sometimes barely, the external onslaughts of emperors, kings, heretics, wars, famines, and diseases. It has survived its own internal corruptions, prejudices, sins, scandals, and misjudgments.

And today, as we well know, the church continues on its bumpy road. As you are well aware, it has shrunk to a pinpoint in secular Europe and is dwindling in South America. The church has lost considerable ground here in secular North America where books on atheism flourish and where only about twenty-six percent of Catholics go to church regularly, Catholic marriages have fallen to half their usual numbers, baptisms are declining, and the youth, who are notoriously religiously illiterate, are drifting away.

But the real truth you should absorb lies in this reality check: while Catholicism is losing ground in the northern hemisphere, it is flowering in parts of the southern hemisphere of our globe. There is the future of the church in this millennium. There the church is thriving and growing in a wonderful way.

For example, take note of this: Africa went from a Catholic population of 1.9 million in 1900 to 130 million in 2000, a growth rate of over six thousand percent. Think about that. This is the most rapid expansion of Catholicism in a single continent in two thousand years of church history. How about this: Did you know that thirty-seven percent of all baptisms in Africa today are of adults? Contrast this to the average worldwide adult baptisms which are 13.2 percent. Yes, there, in the southern hemisphere, lies the future of the church which, in fact, until the Muslim onslaught in the sixth century, at one time had a glorious Catholic past and flourished as the home of St. Cyprian, St. Augustine, the desert fathers, and the monastic movement.

But what about us, where affluence and secularism have muted the presence of God in our part of the world? All is not yet entirely lost. History has shown us that, even in our worst moments, Jesus' ever-present Spirit can break through and raise up saints who turn things around and call us back to the gospel. That gives us hope. But why? Because Jesus said "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

A Francis of Assisi pops up out of the moral mess of the twelfth century. Thomas Merton emerges from the nihilism of Greenwich Village. Weary Rosa Parks says no to racial prejudice and refuses to move to the back of the bus. Nelson Mandela rejects apartheid and goes to prison for twenty-seven years.

Ascension and Pentecost tell us that God is still present, still speaks, still sends out disciples to make a difference, still calls, not just the Francises, Mertons, Parkses and Mandelas, but you and me. Jesus is here and still seeks witnesses. But are we listening and responding to the call?

Jesus had promised that the Spirit would come so that the disciples could witness to his message and proclaim it to the ends of the earth. In Ephesians, the exaltation of Christ and his position as head of his body, the Church, demonstrate his continued presence and guidance. In the ending of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus promises his followers that he will be with them to the end of time. This abiding presence of the Lord within the community of believers is an assurance of the power and guidance that we can rely on as we extend the mission of Jesus in our world. In fact, the purpose of his continued presence is to fulfill our mandate as Church. That is, to be witnesses, preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, make disciples of all nations, and baptize those who believe in the Lord Jesus.

The overarching teaching is that of the continued and abiding presence of the Lord. In Acts, the teachings in today's readings are for the community of faith. It is a message that is relevant to this very day and offers us hope. At times, we are overwhelmed by sin, suffering, oppression, and evil in our world. We may wonder if there is anything we can do that would be meaningful in bringing about healing and change in this sorry old world. However, in our witness to faith values and our work on behalf of those in need, we can rely on the presence and power of the Lord within us. When our ministry seems ineffective, we can reflect on the promise of Jesus to be with us. When doubts blind our faith, we can pray for the Spirit of wisdom and understanding that reveals to us a fuller knowledge of Jesus.

So on this Ascension let us all ascend from our places of fear of the pandemic, lethargy, sense of hopelessness or that comfortable rut of routine and practice our faith and share it with the same zeal as those early disciples.

What Jesus said in the gospel to his disciples on Ascension Day still remains valid and indispensable: "You are witnesses of these things" and "I am

with you always, until the end of the age.” We should remember that. If we do, it wouldn't be the first time in our long history that we arose from the ashes.

Deacon Gerry

