

## Sunday of the Ascension 2020 Year A, A Reflection

There is no sense of loss experienced by Jesus' disciples upon his departure, his Ascension, in the New Testament accounts of this event. On the contrary, in St Luke's gospel we read that the disciples immediately after Jesus' Ascension "went back to Jerusalem full of joy."

In our first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* Luke tells us that at Jesus' departure he promised his disciples that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to empower them to carry out his commission to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth": "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses." Jesus' promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit explained the apostles' attitude in the face of Jesus' departure. The Gospel of John also throws light on this for it teaches that it is through the presence of the Holy Spirit that the ascended Lord remains with his disciples.

St Paul in today's second reading witnesses to Christ's new mode of presence when he writes that at his Ascension he became "the head of the Church; which is his body." A few centuries later St Augustine drew on this thought of Paul to remind his congregation that Jesus who ascended into Heaven, and ourselves who remain on earth, are still united, just as a head and a body remain united. We are now in heaven through our living faith in Christ which "unites us with him" and he is with us on earth, especially in suffering humanity: "I was thirsty and you gave me drink."

And the fifth century Pope, St Leo the Great, drew attention to Jesus' new mode of presence in the world in an Ascension Day sermon saying, "What till then [his Ascension] was visible of our Redeemer was changed into a sacramental presence" – By means of the sacraments Jesus remains with us. St Augustine spoke of faith and suffering humanity making Jesus present. Leo the Great, the sacraments. We might add to that Jesus is present through Scripture and where two or three are gathered in prayer in his name.

Matthew in today's Gospel also draws attention to Jesus' continued presence in the Church. We see this by noting that there is no mention in his Gospel of the risen Lord returning to the Father after he commissions the 11 to make disciples of all the nations. On the contrary, after his final instructions Jesus reassures them of his abiding presence: "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." Matthew ends his Gospel by proclaiming Jesus' presence with us, not his absence.

Paradoxically in ascending to his Father Jesus has drawn closer to us. That is at the heart of the Ascension and the joy and challenge the feast communicates.

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