

Ascension of the Lord “Make Disciples of All Nations”

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My friends, Jesus tells his disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to go back their former ways of life. Jesus tells the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, prior to his ascending into heaven.

Now the Lord’s command here must have been very challenging to the disciples. After the Lord ascended into heaven, they must have looked at each other, scratched their heads and asked the question, “what now? What should we do first?” There were very practical matters that needed to be taken care of like how are we going to pay for this ministry? How are we going to pay for basic things like food, shelter, and travel expenses for the ministry? Camels and donkeys were expensive and the cost of hay was going up. And this, my friends, is how the first Annual Catholic Appeal got started!

As we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord, we have to be careful about what we are celebrating. You see, we have this image in our head of what the Ascension of the Lord must have looked like. It looks like the risen Jesus leaving us, leaving his spouse, the Church, to fend for herself as if he was going on some cosmic vacation for thousands of years. What happened to the message at Christmas, that God became Emmanuel, which means literally, God is with us? What happened to the message of Easter, that Jesus will save us from our sins and rescue us from death itself?

If we take the Ascension of the Lord in isolation from what we have been celebrating this Easter Season, we entirely miss the point. Jesus says I will be with you always, even till the end of time. Jesus also said, where two or three are gathered together, I am in the midst of them. My friends, the Ascension of the Lord isn’t a footnote in salvation history. The Ascension of the Lord is rather central. As Fr. Peter Weatherby put it, “before the Ascension, the risen Christ was present in only one place. After the Ascension, he is present in every place. Before the Ascension, Jesus sat and ate with his disciples by the lakeside, now we receive his body and blood, the bread of life, in every country, in every city of the world. Before, he walked the dusty paths of Palestine, now he strides through every land, borne by his Church. Before, he dwelt in one man and one place, now he dwells in every person who has been baptized into his life. Before, he healed a few of the sick, now he blesses millions of the sick through the sacrament of anointing. Before, he taught the crowds in the market place, from the boat, and on the hillside, now his words are read from every Church and chapel and pulpit. Before, he prayed in solitude on the Mount of Olives, now he prays in every believer. Before, his body suffered for us on the cross, now we receive his risen and mystical body and blood in the Mass. Before, he showed love and compassion to the weak and vulnerable, now his people bring that compassion to every community of the world, caring for the hungry and the distressed.”

In our first reading, the angel asks the disciples, why are you looking at the sky? Why does the angel ask this question? The angel's point is, because of the Ascension of the Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost - we do not need to gaze up into the sky: Jesus dwells with us, he lives in us, and is not absent - but among us forever. And he wants something special from us. This is why Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations prior to ascending into heaven. One wonders if the disciples who heard the Lord's challenge in person could have imagined that a couple thousand years later, their descendants in faith would be answering the Lord's challenge of evangelization thousands of miles away, across the ocean, on a continent they never heard of, baptizing (like we are today) in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit?

What could this mean for us today? To begin with, I believe this feast day calls us first of all to gratitude. We are grateful that the Lord has not abandoned his Church but lives with us and is present to us in a sacramental way that encompasses the whole earth. This feast day also calls us to faith. We recall Jesus' invitation to Thomas, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. What I mean by this is, have you ever felt like God was absent in your life? The message of this feast day, God is never absent. What we need to do during those times is to open our hearts, open our hearts to the gift of faith.

Finally, this feast day calls us to action. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus didn't tell his disciples to sit around and naval gaze. Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations. His commandment includes Woodinville. This week, as we await the celebration of Pentecost, let us reflect on one way we can invite other people in our lives into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, forever present in his spouse the Church. This invitation begins with the person we see in the mirror each morning and from there can transform the world, one soul at a time.