



Ascension of the Lord A May 24, 2020

◆ Ascension - Our Parish Feast Day

◆ Reflections on the Ascension of the Lord

All over the Catholic world and in most mainline Christian churches, this weekend is *Ascension Day*, when we celebrate the moment in time when Jesus, having completed his mission here on earth, returned body and soul to Heaven. I will return to that important event in a moment.

Ascension is also, of course, the name of our parish and school. In a humble way, we are proud to be members of our Ascension Church and school family. Our church family came into existence in 1959, which was christened Ascension by Archbishop Hurley.

I try never to forget and to always be grateful to those “first young families” who sacrificed much to build our first church (our current parish hall) and our first school (our current Ministry Center). Our current school Principal, Anita (Best) Brady, was in kindergarten class when our school doors opened. In 1961, the Sisters of Mercy came from Ireland to help us get started, and they continued to be a wonderful presence in our school for the next 50 years. Our first pastor was Msgr. Martin Power, after whom our parish Knights of Columbus was named.

In the ensuing decades, our fellow Ascension parishioners—living and deceased—went on to sacrifice to build our current church under the leadership of our third pastor, Fr. Val Sheedy. Our current school was built in phases under the leadership of our fourth pastor, Fr. Frank Smith.

Over the six decades, our elementary school developed into a very highly regarded grade school. Our parish went on to develop into a strong faith community with 68 ministries, several of which are outreach ministries to those in need in the Melbourne area. Each fiscal year, we donate over \$100,000 in aid to those in need at home and abroad.

During this global pandemic, we are learning how to do ‘virtual ministry.’ We are seeking to discern what God is doing during this time and how we are to respond to him and to the needs of our church. As we can all imagine, this period of lockdown, social distancing,

sheltering at home, and wearing of masks in public places is going to be talked about for as long as any of us live. As we continue to live our lives in this ‘new normal,’ we will be talking about how Covid-19 changed our world, our economy and our lives. There’s no telling how long this ‘new normal’ will last but it seems we will be in it for the long haul. It behooves us—as a global family, as a nation, as a diocese, as a parish, and as a family—to learn to live in this kind of world. Our call as a faith community is to ask the Holy Spirit to help us see and hear what he is doing in and through all of this, to ask the Holy Spirit to help us respond and minister in this new, strange world we live in. Perhaps we would aptly be called the ‘zoom generation.’

Reflections on Ascension

The Ascension event—when Jesus left the earth to return to his Father in Heaven—signals the end of Jesus’ mission here on earth. In saying that Jesus ‘left us’ (physically), we do not mean that he abandoned us or left us orphans. No, he did not. Instead, ‘he moved on’ to the next chapter of his life, if we can use that phrase in relationship to Jesus. And, of course, Jesus’ return to his Father is the beginning of a new chapter in what we call the ‘History of Salvation,’ which started almost 2,000 years earlier with the Call of Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation. Going forward, Jesus would be present to us through his Holy Spirit. More on that next Sunday (Pentecost Sunday) when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church.

The following are some miscellaneous reflections on this feast day.

Where did Jesus go when he left the earth?

I do not know the name of the writer who responded to the above question in the following way. He/she writes:

Actually, only one of the gospels (Mark) says anything of the direction Jesus took. Luke tells us merely that Jesus “parted” from the disciples; and Matthew and John seem to take for granted that Jesus left but they do not describe the departure at all.

So where did Jesus go? And what is it that we celebrate on Ascension Day?

To ask these questions is to open a can of worms.

Scientifically, we know that, once you exit earth's atmosphere through the hole in the ozone layer, there is nothing but infinite space, stretching far beyond what the human eye can see, even with the help of the Hubble telescope.

So where did Jesus go? Obviously, we are being invited to think and live in categories different from those in which we operate as we move about the world. We are creatures of time and space. We have to know when and where (although, when it comes to a 3 p.m. appointment at the dentist's office, we'd rather forget that time and that place!).

As we ponder Jesus' location, we are brushing up against the boundary between God and our world. It is as much a help to say that God is everywhere as it is to say he is nowhere (in the sense that God has a particular location). Basically, there is no where to God. Although we human beings often cry out in anguish, "God, where are you?" the question makes sense only from our point of view, not from God's.

So where is Jesus? This is the wrong question because it is more about us than it is about Jesus. What the ascension signals is not a change in Jesus' location but in his manner of relating to us. It might be more helpful to say, not that Jesus went up but that he went within. The ascension is the second stage of the incarnation.

In the first stage, Jesus came among us in a human body—he was like us in all things except sin. His influence was limited during his earthly life because, in his body just like ours, he was limited by time and space. His teaching carried as far as the sound of his voice; his reputation spread slowly through village gossip and along trade routes. He even suffered the ultimate indignity that time and space impose upon us: He died.

But, as a result of the resurrection-ascension, Jesus is now incarnated in that human body we call the church. According to Jesus' promises, the church is immune from the ravages of time and limits of space. The gates of hell will not prevail against it as it goes about the task of spreading Jesus' message to the ends of the earth (which pretty much encompasses most of the space in which we are accustomed to move).

In the third and final stage of the incarnation, at the end of history when Jesus comes again, time and space will collapse and he will be "all in all," as our scriptures promise us.

To celebrate the mystery of the ascension properly, we have to put aside the categories of space and time. We must take up instead the language of love and the realities of relationships that are no less real for being invisible to the eye. The ascension is about relationships—between Jesus and me, between Jesus

and the church, between Jesus and the world.

Therefore, the mystery of the ascension is also about us because Jesus could not have gone up—or wherever!—without us. Whatever we say about the risen and glorified Lord has its complementary aspect in our lives.

Jesus died—and that was about us. Jesus rose again—and that was about us. Jesus ascended—and that, too, is about us.

So the real question today is not: Where did Jesus go? What we must really be asking is: Where is he taking us?

The Power Within Us

The following reflection is by Fr. Vima Dasan, S. J.

A priest, Walter Ciszek by name, was in Russia for 23 years, five of which were spent in the dreaded Lubyanka prison in Moscow and ten of which were spent in the harsh Siberian slave labour camp. He was finally released from Russia in 1963, in exchange for two Soviet spies held in the USA. He died in 1984 at the age of 84. After release he wrote a book *'He Ledeth Me.'* In this book he tries to answer the question: 'How did you manage to survive in Russia?' He says: "I was able to endure the inhuman conditions in which I found myself because I experienced somehow the presence of God. I never lost my faith that God was with me, even in the worst of circumstances." What was true of Fr. Walter Ciszek is true of each of us. Jesus is with us; God is with us in the power of his Holy Spirit.

These days, we are especially conscious of the cost and importance of power: how to harness the solar power, wind power and wave power; the power of the trade unions, and the power of television. We talk of the uses and abuses of power by power-crazed people. But on this feast of Ascension, we are not thinking about any power other than the power by which Jesus ascended into heaven. It was by the power of the Father that he ascended. "The power which he used to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand in heaven" (Eph 1:20). And Jesus promised the same power to all his followers: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). He fulfils this promise chiefly at our baptism and confirmation.

When do we experience the power of Jesus dwelling in us? When we read his words, when we deny ourselves for him, when we carry our cross after him or when we suffer persecution because of his name. But we need to pray for his Spirit to become active and alive in us. That is why his disciples, after his ascension, went directly to the upper room in order to pray for nine days before Pentecost. The power of God becomes active through prayer. Prayer means more than an occasional nod in the

direction of heaven. It means sitting down or kneeling down on a regular basis and speaking to our heavenly father asking him for the gift of the Spirit. As we wait in prayer, we will begin slowly to experience God's power; we will begin to be able to forgive and to unite; with the power of the Spirit an individual's life will be transformed; suspicions will be replaced by trust; hostility can change into mutual trust; repulsion and violence can change into repentance. In a word, the whole person can be reborn.

When we take our seat on a train or climb the gangway onto a ship, the thought rarely crosses our minds as to whether there is sufficient power in the engines to move the train or ship. Most likely we take it for granted. Flying in a jet is quite different. Take-off makes us very much aware of the tremendous power required to lift such a weight off the ground. We hold high expectations that it will succeed; after all, our life depends on it. What of the power of God within us on which peace and happiness in this life and eternal life in the next, depend? Do we simply take it for granted or are we truly aware of it? Probably most of us rarely think of it, which is a fatal mistake.

Thus our Lord's ascending to heaven is important to us, because it confirms his claim to be God's own Son; it completes the cycle of incarnation-redemption-glorification; it give us hope that one day we too will be with them in heaven. But in the meantime he has not left us as orphans. Although he is not visibly with us, he dwells within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what he meant when he said: "I am with you till the end of time" (Mt 28:20). Yes, Jesus is still with us.

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Presence and Absence

The following reflection is by Fr. Flor McCarthy, S.D.B.

St. Luke's account of the ascension seems to emphasise the fact that Jesus is *going away*. This means that he will no longer be with the apostles, or with us. However, the story is not so much about Jesus leaving as about Jesus *being glorified*. That's where the emphasis is, and that's what this great feast is about.

It is true that on Ascension Day Jesus withdrew his physical presence from the apostles. The ascension marked the termination of his earthly appearances.

Now physical presence is a great thing but it isn't everything. In fact, it can sometimes actually get in the way of intimate communication. Many of our disappointments in life are caused by the fact that seeing and touching do not always create the closeness we seek.

Two people can be physically close, and yet live

separate, lonely lives, because there is no meeting of minds and hearts. They are like shells lying on the same piece of shore.

On the other hand, people can be separated by thousands of miles and yet feel close to one another. When people think of each other with love, a spiritual bond is created between them, and they enter into a new intimacy. For those who love one another there is no such place as 'far away.'

If we are able to be fully present to our friends when we are with them, our absence too will bear fruit. The memory of that presence, the warmth of it, will continue to nourish them. Thus, not only our presence but also our absence becomes a gift.

Jesus' ascension was not a journey into outer space. It was a journey back to the Father to be glorified. We must not think that he has abandoned us that he once lived on earth but has now gone back to where he really belongs. If this were so, then Christianity would be no more than a remembrance religion.

Today's Gospel ends with Jesus' promise to remain with his disciples always, right to the end of time. How can this be if he has ascended to heaven? It can be because the ascension does not represent his removal from the earth. It represents his liberation from all restrictions of time and space. During his earthly ministry he could only be in one place at a time. But now that he is united with God, he is present wherever God is present; and that is everywhere.

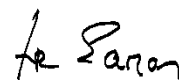
The first Christians understood this very well. They knew that Jesus was still with them, even if not in the same way as before. They believed that they encountered him when the Scriptures were expounded and the bread was broken (in the eucharist). And they believed that death would mean being united with him in glory for ever.

We Christians of the present day have those same means of encountering Jesus - the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread.

Jesus gave the apostles a great task to perform, namely, to preach the Gospel to the world. That task has been handed on to us. We draw strength from the conviction that the risen and glorified Christ is with us as he was with the apostles.

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Have a blessed week,



Amazing Outreach of the Knights of Columbus during the Pandemic

The following is an excerpt from the May Edition of *Columbia* (a Knights of Columbus monthly magazine), written by Carl A. Anderson the Supreme Knight.

During Holy Week, I was asked by the White House to join the president and vice president on a conference call with thousands of faith leaders and report to them on our efforts. A prominent evangelical pastor and a rabbi representing the Jewish Federations of North America spoke as well.

While people of many faith traditions are doing wonderful work, what is striking about the Knights of Columbus response is its variety.

First, there is the multimillion-dollar food assistance program being carried out through our “Leave No Neighbor Behind” initiative. Launched during Holy Week in more than 20 cities in the United States and Canada, it is moving throughout both countries as our brother Knights team up with local food banks.

Blood donations have been an important part of our charitable work for nearly a century, and now, when the need is so great, we are again stepping up.

“Leave No Neighbor Behind” encourages each council to reach out to every brother Knight - offering a helping hand should he or another member of his family be especially vulnerable or challenged by the pandemic—as well as to others in need in our parishes and neighborhoods.

We have also made available through our Church Loan program a \$100 million emergency fund to provide loans up to \$1 million to help U.S. dioceses continue operations during this crisis.

Overseas, we are working with the Vatican’s Bambino Gesù pediatric hospital in Rome to create a new treatment room for infants with Covid-19 infections. We are supporting Catholic hospitals and a medical clinic in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as programs in the Philippines in response to the pandemic.

At a time when it is more important than ever, we again made possible the Holy Father’s Holy Week broadcasts, as well as his special Urbi et Orbi blessing in light of the pandemic.

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