

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS. WHERE DID HE GO WHEN HE LEFT THE EARTH?

Reflection for Ascension, Cycle B

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?

Letting Go, Moving

Reflecting on today's celebration, Joan DeMerchant writes:

Being left behind can be tough. Having friends move away or letting go of a loved one through death or some other separation can leave us feeling empty and disoriented. Until we learn to deal with a sometimes radically re-arranged life, we drift through a sort of "limbo" between things as they were and things as they have not yet come to be. We all know the feeling.

Time and again people have had to "let go" of persons whose impact upon their lives has been especially powerful. Great leaders have come and gone, frequently stunning their followers with their sudden departure. Gradually those who missed them deeply and feared they could never again function adequately in their absence learned to carry on the work that still needed to be done. We are reminded, for example, that the Israelites completed their journey to the Promised Land without the great liberator, Moses. We recall that leaders such as Gandhi or Kennedy left unfinished business in their respective countries for others to complete. And the followers of Martin Luther King, Jr. were responsible to continue the work of liberating the racially dispossessed in his keenly-felt absence.

We enter today's readings with the all-too-familiar scenario of faithful friends and followers wondering what on earth they were to do now that Jesus was gone. A lot of hopes and expectations were unfulfilled. The vision for the future was somewhat hazy, and misunderstandings prevailed (would Israel be powerful again?) The same kinds of doubts as are raised in all similar leave-takings must have permeated the atmosphere. What must it have been like to "let go" of Jesus for those who had learned to depend upon his empowering self-giving presence?

We can only guess at the disappointment and confusion that was experienced. What we do know from reading is that the early community learned early on what many seemingly abandoned followers have struggled to learn before and since: there was work to be done, and they were expected to do it. Further, they were not really abandoned; power and presence in a new way, sufficient to enable them for their task, would be given them. Some of their dreams and expectations needed to be forsaken (Israel's power was never restored quite as some had expected); misunderstandings or inadequate hopes needed to be clarified or corrected. Visions needed to expand and be challenged in new directions. But they would not be left alone, and they could do what needed doing.

Today we are reminded that we must constantly resist the temptation of the early community to stand around and wait, "looking up at the skies." Christians are notorious for slipping into "waiting stances": we wait for God to convert our enemies' hearts, to show mercy to the homeless and hungry, to solve our family's and nation's problems, to bring peace upon the earth. The possibility of God's effective power in each of these—and other—instances claims our hope and our faith. Nevertheless, we are no more sanctioned to stand and wait for God to act than were Jesus' followers. We also run the similar risk of dreaming the wrong dreams, or having inadequate expectations and vision. In the great mystery of things, perhaps, God will act when we act.

In any case, we are told today that we are to get busy. We hope that God will give us the same "spirit of wisdom and insight to know him clearly" that Paul wanted for the people at Ephesus long ago. We still have a lot to figure out about what we are to witness to and teach others and how most effectively to do that. But there is no mistake about the fact that we are called to carry on. Most important of all, we know that we have not been left alone.

Questions to Ponder

1. Name some things you have been waiting for God to do for which you yourself may need to take responsibility. What do you need to empower or support you?
2. What are some inadequate understandings or expectations about Jesus (or about life) which you may need to "let go" of? When and how have your dreams or vision been challenged or stretched?

Carrying on the Mission

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls on his disciples and us to carry on his mission, by following in his footsteps. Reflecting on today's feast, Jay Cormier shares the following two inspiring stories. The first story is called *Margaret's Shoes*. Cormier writes:

To be a practicing Catholic in 16th century England was dangerous. In the wake of Henry VIII's and Elizabeth I's insistence on being recognized as the sole head of the Church, Parliament enacted several severe anti-Catholic laws. The celebration of the "Roman" Mass was made illegal—priests were hunted down, arrested and executed. To shelter a priest, to teach the Catholic faith, to provide any aid or support to the outlaw religion were considered treason, punishable by death.

There are many stories of brave English Catholics who kept the faith alive in England and paid the ultimate price. First among the martyrs of England and Wales was St. Margaret Clitherow of Yorkshire. This valiant woman was hanged in 1586 at the age of 33 for harboring priests and hearing Mass in her home. Married to a Yorkshire butcher, Margaret also ran a small—and illegal—school for children in her home. She spent more than a decade in and out of prison—released once only long enough for the birth of one of her children.

Finally, in March of 1586, a raid on the Clitherow house revealed the existence of a priest's hiding place in the attic as well as chalices, missals and vestments. Margaret was arrested, imprisoned and formally charged. She refused to consent to a trial: "Having made no offense, I need no trial," she said. The court had little choice in the matter but to find her guilty and sentence her to death.

From her prison cell the night before she died, Margaret made a final request: She left her shoes to her eldest daughter, Anne, who was then 12 years old. The message from mother to daughter was clear: Follow in my footsteps; the wordless gift said, carry on.

Today, Jesus leaves us his "shoes." He calls us to carry on his Gospel of compassion, reconciliation and justice; he entrusts to us the work of resurrection. In Baptism, every Christian of every time and place takes on the role of witness to all that Jesus did and taught: We are witnesses not only in our articulating the powerful words of the Gospel but in the quiet, simple, but no-less powerful expressions of compassion and love that echo the same compassion and love of God-God who is Father and Son and Brother and Sister to us all.

His second story is called "**The 'God Words'**"

A pastor remembers two special parishioners:

Electra was four years old and lived with her mother in a welfare hotel. At a Thanksgiving dinner for the homeless, the pastor invited them to stay with his family for the weekend. Little Electra noticed that her new friends prayed before meals. Electra implored them, "Please, teach me the God words." The little girl committed the simple words of the blessing to memory.

When they returned home, Electra taught the words to her neighbors in the hotel. Her mother later told the pastor that the child could no longer bite into a peanut butter sandwich without making everyone around her say the "God words."

Edgar also lived at the hotel. He often walked two miles to come to church. Edgar was a bit rough around the edges and could get loud and demanding. One Palm Sunday, Edgar waited in the sanctuary all day for the pastor, who had a full schedule of services, appointments and visits. Edgar then asked the pastor for a ride home. The exhausted pastor, praying for patience, got behind the wheel—and Edgar talked the poor man's ear off.

When they pulled into the parking lot of old motel, a door opened and an elderly woman emerged. Making her way to the car, she stopped and knocked on another door and another elderly woman peeked out. Soon a small crowd had appeared. For the first time, the pastor noticed that Edgar had a bunch of palms in his hand. He had promised to bring his neighbors palms from the liturgy. The elderly woman clutched her palm as if it were the Hope diamond.

Then Edgar turned to the pastor and commanded, “Bless us.” the pastor, filled with awe at the scene he had just witnessed, did so, blessing their palms placing his hands on each forehead, pronouncing benediction.

While he said the blessing, the pastor realized that Edgar, for all his rough edges, was the only person who passed for a pastor in that backwater parish of broken-souls.

We have experienced the extraordinary event of Christ in our lives—now Christ entrusts to us the responsibility for bringing the blessings and grace of that experience to others. The Jesus of the Ascension commissions us to share the “God words” with those who have not heard them, to bring the “palm branches” of Christ’s victory to the hurting and forgotten in our midst.

A Quick Visit to Guatemala

This Wednesday I leave for a quick trip to Guatemala where I will visit with Tim Kantz (son of Paul and Mary Kay Kantz—who spoke on Mother’s Day). Tim, a graduate of Fordham Jesuit University, is dedicating some year of his life to help the poor in Guatemala. We have already donated to Tim \$16,000 from this years budget tithe money. As you know it is my policy, when possible, to visit places where we send portions of our tithe. I feel certain Tim has been using the money very well to help the poor. I just wanted to pay a quick visit to witness first hand his good work. I will return this Friday. A prayer for a safe trip will be appreciated.

Birthdays

Last Sunday, I celebrated my 59th birthday. Thank you for your greetings. It was fun discovering that several other parishioners have their birthday on May 21. One person sent me the following piece on birthdays written by the last Fr. Henri Nouwen. You might want to share it with a family member or friend on his/her next birthday.

One of the central human needs is to be acknowledged and loved for who we are. That is why birthdays are high holy days.

Celebrating a birthday is exalting life and being glad for it. On a birthday we do not say: “Thanks for what you did, or said, or accomplished.” No we say:” Thank you for being born and being among us.” ...Celebrating a birthday reminds us of the goodness of life, and in this spirit we really need to celebrate people’s birthdays every day, by showing gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, gentleness and affection. These are ways of saying: “*It’s good that you are alive; it’s good that you are walking with me on this earth.* Let’s be glad and rejoice. This is the day that God has made for us to be and to be together.”

By the way, this is our parish’s birthday. We are 47 years established.