May 13, 2018

Feast of the Ascension (B)
Acts 1:1-11; Ps 47:2-3, 6-9; Eph 1:7-23 or 4:1-13 or 4:1-7, 11; Mark 16:15-20

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

When we think of the ascension of Jesus, we often imagine his physical form ascending into the clouds to sit at the right hand of God, there to rule over heaven and earth. But what does all this mean? In the first place, contemporary science tells us that there is no celestial heaven above earth. Rather, there are planets and moons and stars and space stations. So we have to think of ascension as something other than rising to some heavenly place. Second, theology does not speak of the majestic God as having a physical body with hands. Consequently, we must discover the profound religious meaning of these strong images if we are to appreciate the mystery of the Ascension.

The cosmology of the early Christians was quite uncomplicated. Like most ancient Near Eastern people, they believed that heaven was an actual place above earth, and that the gods lived there. Thus to say that Jesus ascended meant that he is with God – wherever that might be. Furthermore, to sit at the right hand is to sit in the place of honor. Therefore, the ascension of Jesus means that he is with God, in the singular place of honor. Such honor entitles him to act as ruler over everything and everyone. In a certain way, his success at this – because of his ascension - depends upon our willingness to allow him to work though us in accomplishing this. So, this feast acknowledges Jesus’ glory and majesty, while at the same time placing a challenge before us. This challenge in found in the gospel account: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news.”

Fundamentally, the good news is that all are loved by God. The challenge placed before all of us is to live that good news out in our lives. If we realize that we are so loved, we will not be tempted to compete with anyone, or any group of people whom we think might threaten our dignity. Rather, we will strive to live in peace. We will not be tempted to amass the goods and riches of the world in an attempt to bolster our status in society. Rather, we will respect Earth’s ability to support our life styles and we will work to ensure an equitable life style for others. Realizing that we are all so loved, we will esteem others, and respect their gender, racial, cultural, political, and religious differences.

Most people probably do not think of social harmony when they think of the ascension of Jesus. However, “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” is clearly underscored in the reading from Ephesians, especially in the passage from chapter four. And it is there in both accounts of the event: Don’t look up (Acts 1:11), look to the horizon where you will “Go into all the world...” (Mark 16:15). It is right that we reflect on Jesus’ exaltation in the place of honor with God. But his leaving Earth places the furthering of the reign of God in our hands. It is our time to get on with God’s work.

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