

Be the Leaven for Heaven

The Ascension of the Lord – Cycle C – June 2, 2019 **53rd World Communications Day**

Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Lk 24:46-53

“You will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but to the ends of the earth” (Acts)

Note: The feast of the Ascension was introduced rather late into the liturgical calendar—i.e., only in the 4th century—since it was not held to be a ‘historical event’ that happened forty days *after* Jesus’ resurrection. If Jesus’ heavenly ascension and enthronement did, indeed, take place 40 days *after* the resurrection, then, the question arises: What was Jesus doing on earth for 40 days before the Ascension? Thus, rather than consider the Ascension as a historical commemoration, it is very important to understand its relevance for our pastoral practice and our Christian mission.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Every year, the 1st and 2nd readings on Ascension Day are the same. There is only a change in the gospel reading. In this Cycle C, we have two accounts of the Ascension by the same author, evangelist Luke, namely: (a) In the first reading from the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ that takes place 40 days after Easter; and, (b) In the Gospel passage that takes place on Easter Day itself. On the one hand, the Gospel looks *backward* to Jesus’ earthly life and reminds us that his life—including the post-Easter revelations of Jesus as alive after his passion—came to a definitive end. We can no longer know Jesus as he was on earth. On the other hand, the reading from ‘Acts’ looks *forward* to the future – “the promise of the Father,” which is the gift of the Holy Spirit and the worldwide mission of the Church.
2. The reading from the Acts mentions Jesus’ assurance to his disciples that His Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit will, indeed, be fulfilled. The ‘baptism with the Holy Spirit’ will be different from the water-baptism administered by John, the Baptist, since, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, all the disciples will be totally transformed. The disciples raise a question about the restoration of the ‘kingdom of Israel’ since that was a common expectation among the Jews. However, Jesus’ answer indicates that the kingdom will now not be confined to Israel alone, but he tells them: “*You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.*” [This is repeated in the gospel passage]. In other words, the whole earth is the fertile field for the sowing of the Good News and the spread of God’s kingdom. After entrusting them with the mission, they see Jesus being “taken up” as they gaze at the clouds. The prevalent understanding of that time was that the abode of the gods is ‘up’ and ‘above’. The reprimand of the two men in white robes (angels) was probably addressed to those in the community who wasted their lives apparently doing nothing except claiming that there were waiting for Christ to return.
3. The gospel passage resembles a farewell scene with Jesus imparting a blessing to his disciples before departing heavenward. However, unlike other farewells that are normally tearful, the disciples “returned to Jerusalem *with great joy*” for they felt Jesus’ presence in their midst. In both the Ascension accounts, the disciples are told, “You are my witnesses,” and are assured to receive “power from on high.” The Holy Spirit will empower them to be witnesses. But, being a minority, they will have to function like salt or leaven or light. They are to be *‘the leaven for heaven’*, so to say.

Linking the 2nd Reading with the theme of the Ascension and Heaven:

With a tone of prayerful praise, Paul provides a very captivating view of salvation history with Christ as the centre of the cosmos so as to “have the eyes of your heart enlightened”! We are to be a joyful, hopeful people since Christ has ascended into heaven. Thus, let us remember: (a) We are all chosen to be witnesses to the crucified-risen-ascended Jesus, and (b) We must proclaim hope of heavenly bliss with Christ who is now Lord of Creation. Once again, *be the leaven for heaven!*

Pope Francis’s Message for 53rd World Communication Day: [Full text available on the Internet].

“Our capacity for understanding and communication among human persons is based on the communion of love among the divine Persons. God is not Solitude, but Communion; God is Love, and therefore communication, because love always communicates; indeed, it communicates itself in order to encounter the other. In order to communicate with us and to communicate himself to us, God adapts himself to our language, establishing a real dialogue with humanity throughout history ... The Church herself is a network woven together by Eucharistic communion, where unity is based not on ‘likes’, but on the truth, on the ‘Amen’, by which each one clings to the Body of Christ, and welcomes others.”

Three Contextual Concerns:

The Leaven Concern: It’s not easy to be a witness to Christ in India where Catholics are less than 2% of the total population. Our challenge is to be like ‘leaven in the dough’ or ‘salt in food’ – neither too much, nor too little; but just right! Paul says, “a little yeast leavens the whole dough” (Gal 5:9). Do we witness to the gospel wherever we go and in whatever we do?

The Heaven Concern: We have become so consumeristic and materialistic in our lifestyles that we tend to push out heaven on the back burner. “Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we shall die” is the popular adage by which many people live even if they profess to be ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’. There is need to check ourselves, first, and then challenge others. Paul writes: “Our homeland is heaven and it is from there that we expecting a Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20).

The Communications’ Concern: We have become slaves of the mobile-phone and internet and cannot do without these. Pope Francis says that many are becoming “social hermits”! We use plenty of devices and exchange hundreds of clips, SMSs and visuals without really communicating. Am I discreet about my use of communication devices? How can I more effectively use the InfoTech Revolution to carry the Good News to the ends of the earth?

In Lighter Vein: When a parish priest peeped into a bar, he was shocked to see many of parishioners drinking in it. Angry, he rounded them up and shepherded them into his church. After scolding them for drinking, he asked: “How many of you want to go to heaven?” All raised their hands, except one. “Don’t you want to go to heaven?” asked the priest, irritated. “No!” said the drunk resolutely. “You really mean to say you don’t want to go to heaven when you die?” asked the priest again. The man smiled, “Of course, I want to go to heaven *when I die*. I thought you’re going there right *now*! Now, I want to get back to the bar!”
