

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

St. Matthew 28:16-20

Just over forty days ago we witnessed to the passion and death of Christ. Forty days ago we celebrated the bodily resurrection of Christ—His return to life and His life with the disciples. Today we commemorate His bodily rise to Heaven.

For the past few weeks the Gospel has proclaimed our Lord's repeated assertion that unless He goes from us the Holy Spirit cannot come to us. It is sometimes asked why our Lord could not have stayed with us on earth? If He had there would not be the problems we face now. He could continue to perform miracles—when anyone was sick He could cure them, when anyone died He could bring them back to life, and we wouldn't have to suffer the tragedies that we do. If any countries were to go to war with one another, He could talk with their leaders and tell them not to fight—because who could possibly ignore Christ?

But God did not become man and live amongst us so that we did not have to live life ourselves. We are to live in imitation of Christ and to rely wholly on His grace through the Sacraments, to testify that He is Lord and God and to make known the one, true faith that He gave to us, because by doing so we live our own lives fully.

From the Book of Genesis we read that we are made in the image and likeness of God. We were told to participate in creation, to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (*Gen.* 1:28). We were told to participate in salvation, to "go... and make

disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Mt. 28:19-20*). And We were told to participate in sanctification, to "be perfect, as [our] heavenly father is perfect" (*Mt. 5:48*).

We were not created to be observers or passers-by but to work with God for the Kingdom of Heaven. Just as God creates, we are to create with Him. Just as God saves, we are to save with Him. And just as God makes holy, we are to make holy with Him.

Our Lord had to ascend to Heaven, for if He did not the Holy Spirit would not descend to earth. And it is the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for each of us to participate in the work of God here and now. Because what the Holy Spirit does is make Christ, who when on earth was limited by His body to where He could go and where He could be, available everywhere and at every time and to everyone. That is why the Lord could say, "behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt. 28:20*).

The Lord said, "when I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all men to myself" (*Jn. 12:32*). Just over forty days ago we remembered our Lord being lifted up from the earth onto the cross. Today we celebrate Him being lifted up from the earth into Heaven.

This coming down or descent of Christ to become Man is imaged in our lives when we engage with the totality of our human experiences; the good and the ugly. It is human nature to run away from suffering and from that which is awkward and painful and to seek only that which is beautiful. But it is our suffering and our sins that weigh us down and prevent us from rising. We cannot expect to share in the ascension of Christ unless we plumb the depths of our soul and face the viciousness, the maliciousness and the self-interest that we falsely justify but which are nothing more than a millstone around our neck that drags us into hell. It is only by an unfettered recognition of our own hardness of heart that we shall ever be able to desire a death to our sinfulness

so that we may be born aloft in heaven.

In Christ's life he encountered the brutality of a disordered humanity, and after His crucifixion He descended into hell and confronted the misery that plagues lost souls. He did this so that He could rescue them and carry them to His kingdom. But without this descent to become Man and without this descent into Hell there would be no liberation of enslaved souls.

we must confront the hardness of our heart and recognise the futility of our own efforts for salvation so that by that death to self we can wholly succumb to that love which shakes the bars of our cell and causes the doors to be thrown open so that we can climb the stairs of our self-imposed prison to the land of salvation of Christ.