

Sunday after Ascension

I take as my text from today's Gospel passage from St. John:

WHEN the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy sight. O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

This past Thursday, we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, commemorating our Lord's Ascent into Heaven to the Right Hand of God. For this most significant feast day of the Church, we had only nine present to celebrate, very disappointing for such an event.

An event we Christians believe and accept as historical, recorded in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, as well as in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, in which St. Luke, though not a witness to the Ascension, gives an account based on his interviews of those who were witnesses.

The Ascension was more than a physical event with our Lord rising from the earth to disappear into the clouds; much more, it was an event that transcended the physical where Jesus, in his Resurrected Body, was taken up into a cloud and passed from the physical world into the spiritual world. With his Ascension, he was no longer present in time and space.

It was with the Incarnation that our Lord entered into time and space; now, with the Ascension, the Incarnation is completed, the moment in time that we have celebrated.

In truth, the Ascension marked an ending and a beginning. It was the culmination of all recorded and unrecorded history since creation; it was the beginning of the *End Times*.

Yes, we have entered the *end times* but not as popularly understood. We have entered into the final era of our history as God's Creation.

We have used the terms **BC** and **AD** — *Before Christ* and *In the Year of our Lord* — to distinguish the two periods in time, two terms that fit well with describing the concept of *End Times*.

We are now in the *Year of Our Lord*, the conclusion of all that had gone before, the conclusion of history marked by the *Incarnation*, *Crucifixion*, and *Ascension* — a singular event in the salvation of mankind, indeed, of the world; but that is all that we really know. Jesus was very specific in telling us that only the Father knew the day and time when he, Jesus Christ, would return for the *Final Judgment*.

When we consider today's Epistle passage from St. Peter in conjunction with the Gospel passage for today from John, we can begin to see that the *End Times* is both collective and individual.

The point to which all history moved was the coming of the Saviour of the World, when Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, entered into time, in the fullness of time in which all things were fulfilled in him; the ending of one period and the beginning of another.

Though we may accept that the *end is near*, to better understand this concept, we must look at *near*, first from the perspective of eternity, as in the words of the psalmist:

*For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, * and as a watch in the night.*

And we must also look at the concept of *near* in the individual, personal perspective, as in we, each one of us, live in the *Shadow of Eternity*, for our own individual end is always near. None of us knows when he will *cross the bar* and enter the *larger life*.

This whole concept of the *end is near* should not be paralyzing; rather, it should be a catalyst in our lives, leading us to a deeper spirituality and a better understanding of the purpose of our individual lives in the service of God.

While we, collectively as God's creation, are living in the *End Times*, at the same time and just as importantly, we, as individual human beings, are living in our own *End Times*, in that we do not know the day and the hour when God will call us out of this world into the larger life.

But we must not be afraid nor live in fear, for we most assuredly know the love that God has for us and may most assuredly trust in the promise that our Lord made, the promise that he was going to prepare a place for us that we may be united with him in his Heavenly Kingdom.

We have been reassured by the *Resurrection* and *Ascension* of Jesus Christ, an event not without human witness — that is the beauty of Christianity, human witness to the *Resurrection* and *Ascension* — by this witness, we have been reassured that the temporal shall give way to the eternal and open for us the gates to eternal life.

We come now to the *Ascension*: the moment for which Jesus had prepared his disciples, knowing that he could not be present with them on this earth indefinitely.

And the question is, of course, why couldn't he have continued to be present? Why **did** he have to withdraw from his disciples, from the world?

First of all, Jesus could not have used his full power while subject to the limitations of time and space. True, his body had been modified by the *Resurrection*; still he could not have been equally with his Apostles, wherever they were, whether in Rome or in Antioch or elsewhere, at the same time.

Secondly, he could not have been mystically or sacramentally present if he were physically or materially present.

Thirdly, he could not have sent the **Holy Spirit**, the **Comforter**, if he had remained in their presence. The **Holy Spirit** is his representative and the **Third Person** of the **Holy Trinity**.

The time had come for the Apostles to learn to be on their own and to rely on the help of the **Holy Spirit**.

And so, Christ, having ascended into Heaven, continues his work of redemption through his representatives on earth — the Apostles and the Church. An analogy is drawn from the Jewish high priest who passes through the veil into the *Holy of Holies* on the *Day of Atonement* and presents the blood of the lambs, sprinkling the mercy-seat.

Our Ascended Lord is the true high priest who has entered into heaven itself, has passed through the veil, to present his Sacrifice and *to appear in the presence of God for us*. (Heb. 9:24)

Before this was to come about; before his Sacrifice on the Cross; Jesus forewarned his disciples. Though they may not have fully understood his warning, when the time was come, they would remember, and they would be prepared.

He told them too that he would send the **Comforter**, the **Holy Spirit**:

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.

In today's passage from St. John, our Lord tells the disciples, and us through them, that the **Holy Spirit** is to bear witness, and that witness is manifested in their souls, their hearts, and their minds, that they may also bear witness.

That witness is not for the Apostles only; it extends to all of us through their ministry, for there is the witness of the **Holy Spirit**, and there is the witness of men; indeed, it is upon us that the witness to Christ now falls.

So, we come to the broader meaning of the Ascension and the reason for so many witnesses to be present at our Lord's Ascension — it is the call to witness to Christ. Though we may find it a daunting task, it truly, is not a task but a privilege indeed of being a Christian.

Now, as we take upon ourselves the call, we find that there are three elements in Christian witness:

First, it comes from an intimate relationship with Christ, else how can we be a witness to someone we don't know. This witness comes from the personal experience of our Lord working in our own lives.

Second, it comes from inner conviction. We must know without a doubt of what and to whom we witness, that others can perceive our conviction of the truth to which we witness, that inner conviction from our own intimate, personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult, it comes in an outward testimony. We cannot be a witness unless we testify. That we know the truth is only a part of witness; the other part is telling it.

Jesus tells us that being a witness to him requires courage and commitment for which we must be prepared.

That witness to Christ comes in many forms. It is born not only in a spoken witness but also in our love of others, our love of all of God's creation; it is born in our works, how we live our lives, and how we worship God.

It is the possibility that our lives could be a living form of worship, even a prayer to God, as in:

Our waking thoughts, should they not be of God?

Should not our last thoughts of the day also be of God?

And what about in between, throughout the day and evening: shouldn't we offer up ourselves to God, our souls and bodies in living service and witness to our Lord by our thoughts, words, and deeds?

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he did not leave us to face the world alone. He sent the **Holy Spirit**, the **Comforter**, to lead us into all truth and to awaken in us the courage and desire to witness to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In Heaven, our Lord continues his work of salvation, bearing the scars and tokens of his **Passion**, and we are joined to that heavenly intercession through a great mystery ordained by him for that very purpose — the *Holy Eucharist*, the earthly counterpart of Christ's heavenly pleading.

Through the *Holy Eucharist*, the worship of heaven and earth are joined together as one.

Through the *Holy Eucharist*, we share in the blessing of that heavenly pleading.

Through the *Holy Eucharist*, we are fed with the Bread of Life, Christ being present spiritually in fulfillment of his **Promise** at the *Ascension*.

Now, acknowledging that we are in the *End Times*, we find comfort in Christ's **Promise**, assured by His *Incarnation*, *Resurrection*, and *Ascension* — comfort through the indwelling of the **Holy Spirit**.

The **Holy Spirit** is present in our hearts, our minds, and our souls to inspire and guide us and to awaken in us the courage to witness to Christ.

Through the operation of the **Holy Spirit**, we are strengthened spiritually as we are fed with the *Bread of Life*.

Our call to witness becomes clear as we read the **Holy Scriptures**: enlightened and inspired with the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospels; with the Epistles of Paul, Peter, and James; and with the testimony of St. John himself, who encourages us to embrace the **Love** of God and show it in our lives.

In these *End Times*, what else is our definitive witness other than to worship and glorify God in our lives, in all that we do and say, in our love of one another, in our love of all his creation, in our love of him who created us, who saved us, and who has made it possible for us to attain to eternal life in the joy of his **Presence**.