

May 8, 2016, The Ascension of the Lord

The whole of the Easter season is about awe and wonder. In fact, the whole of Jesus' message is about awe and wonder and the joy that it brings.

I always enjoyed fireworks, as I suspect most of you do as well. I remembered as a boy we would go to the stadium and they would launch rocket after rocket and fill the twilight with large expanses of color, much smoke and loud noises while we just stood there looking into the evening sky. Later while being stationed in Mississippi, I noticed there were no fireworks displays on the 4th of July. It confused me that no one took the opportunity to have these great fireworks displays. Only later did this Yankee discover that Vicksburg fell on the 4th of July and out of some unfathomable logic no one could enjoy fireworks in Mississippi on that day ever since. Many years later when I was a young father, we had the occasion to bring our children to see the fireworks while standing on a palisade overlooking a river. The height of the palisade above the launch site on the river made it so the fireworks exploded just above our heads. That was awesome, even if it did frighten my older daughter and we left early. Today we hear of another great event in the skies but this time over ancient Jerusalem, and we even hear of people awestruck and standing around staring into the sky.

In the beginning of the Book of Acts that we hear today and even in the feast which we celebrate today as Christians, we are to experience the conclusion of Jesus' mission on earth. Luke's poignant description secretly touches us all as we too stand staring into the sky as we approach the end of this Easter season. But as true believers what are we to be about as Jesus goes from walking this earth to being with His Father for the rest of eternity? What are we to think and do? What are all Christians to do? Thankfully we get some good advice from four different sources today- St Luke in the first reading from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, from the Psalm, from St Paul in his letter to the Hebrews and a second time from St Luke in the Gospel passage.

I personally enjoy visiting this story of the Ascension of our Lord into heaven as St Luke tells it. I can instinctively see myself standing there after the fact just staring up into the sky and asking, "Ok, what comes next?" The answer that always rings back is; "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven." Simple enough instruction until our overly excited imaginations start asking but what happens between now and then? I would suppose that Jesus summed it up as always believe, trust, bear loving witness, and of course, do not be afraid.

The Psalm tells us to be joyful, to be glad, to bear witness to this awesome promised fulfilled. Jesus was the fulfillment of the Father's promise and then He confirms His Son for the flawless completion of His mission - to spread the good news. The good news that we are loved by the

Father, we are saved through the Son, and we only need to believe and let that love flow to all around us.

In the letter of Paul to the Hebrews, we are reminded that the Jesus remains in our lives as an advocate for those who believe, that they may have salvation. We have a clarification of why we should have joyful hearts. After all, there is now a path and an advocate to get us back to the Father. The simple life of a carpenter turned teacher is elevated through the eyes of faith to what it really always was - an incredible act of love by our God to invite us to a personal relationship with the Father through the intercession of the Son. Just to make it a little more joyous we need those eyes of faith to add – “for all time”.

We then come to the gospel of Luke. It seems the apostles finally “got it”. They hear the words of Jesus and are convinced in the very core of their being that their friend and teacher is for real. He is truly risen from the dead and goes to dwell with the Father for all time. It is not a trip to Disneyworld for the Son. No, it is to send the Spirit to strengthen all believers, all who have not seen but believe through the eyes of faith. But hold on, He is not finished and just fades from our sight. No, He continues to be our advocate before the Father for all time.

So what are the consequences of the Lord rising from the dead and then ascending into heaven for His followers? How do we as Christians live, following these events? After all, there does seem to be a very real call to respond. As Pope Francis said at the beginning of his pontificate, “... do we worship the Lord? Do we turn to God only to ask him for things, to thank him, or do we also turn to him to worship him? What does it mean, then, to worship God? ... All of us, in our own lives, consciously and perhaps sometimes unconsciously, have a very clear order of priority concerning the things we consider important. Worshipping the Lord means giving him the place that He must have; worshipping the Lord means stating, believing—not only by our words but by how we live our lives – how we witness to what Jesus has given us—that He alone truly guides our lives; worshipping the Lord means that we are convinced before him that He is the only God, the God of our lives, the God of our history.”

“This has a consequence in our lives,” the pontiff noted. “We have to empty ourselves of the many small or great idols that we have and in which we take refuge and upon which we often seek to base our security. They are idols that we sometimes keep well hidden; they can be ambition, careerism, a taste for success, placing ourselves at the centre, the tendency to dominate others, the claim to be the sole masters of our lives, some sins to which we are bound, and many others. ... The Pope goes on to ask us all - I would like a question to resound in each of your hearts, and I would like you to answer it honestly: Have I considered which idol lies hidden in my life that prevents me from worshipping the Lord? Worshipping is stripping ourselves of our idols, even the most hidden ones, and choosing the Lord as the centre, as the privileged path of our lives.”

“The Lord,” ... “calls us each day to follow him with courage and fidelity. He has made us the great gift of choosing us as his disciples. He invites us to proclaim him with joy as the Risen one,

but He asks us to do so by word, deed, and by the witness of our lives in our everyday lives. The Lord is the only God of our lives, and He invites us to strip ourselves of our many idols and to worship him alone - to proclaim, to witness, to worship.”

So we have the whole picture painted before us. All these events offer us confidence that Jesus is what He claims. He not only rose from the dead, but ascends into heaven where he remains in relationship with His Father, with our Father. It is not only for His joy, but to also act as our advocate so our joy can be complete. In a month and a half we will be able to once again stare into the evening sky and see the colors, smoke and hear the noise of fireworks, but I would challenge you all to pause for a moment and place yourselves beside the apostles as Jesus ascended into heaven and through the eyes of faith be there, truly there and let your hearts realize the joy in that scene. What “rising from the dead” and “going to the Father” really means in our lives. As our Pope says, how do we express the joy of being loved by the Father in how we live our lives, every day? Between now and then, we need to examine our hearts to see how much the Ascension of our Lord permeates our lives, our very beings in our relationship with the Father and especially with all those around us.

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