

Jesus' Ascension into Heaven

Today's Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 47) was part of the liturgy in ancient Israel for the enthronement of the king. Its origin may go back to the day when David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the newly captured city of Jerusalem, thus enthroning God as king in Israel.

The Church has chosen this psalm because today we celebrate the climax of Jesus' life. At his death he entered into the fullness of communion with God which we speak of as 'heaven' where he became, in the words of the psalm, 'great king over all the earth'. Since Easter we have had a period of forty days in which we have been thinking about all the different ways in which we experience Jesus being present among us. We have been thinking of the various ways in which his love is radiating out from the Church which, as Paul tells us in the Second Reading, 'is his Body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation' (Ephesians 1:23). As we continue to preach the Gospel, Jesus is with us, in the words of today's Gospel: 'confirming the word by the signs which accompany it' (Mark 16:20). The 40 days is itself symbolic of our life's journey. We know that he will be with us at every stage of our journey through life.

Today, however, we begin by forgetting ourselves and just looking at him, and expressing our joy that at the end of his life's journey, God raised him to life and took him to himself, into the eternal embrace of love that we call heaven. Like us, Jesus spent his life dreaming of this day, his whole being longing to see God face to face and to enjoy, without distraction, the communion of love for which we are all created and for which we all yearn. As we love him, so our hearts are happy for him. His time of waiting, his time of suffering is over. Nothing can ever come between the longing of his heart and the joy of experiencing his heart's desire.

Being in communion with his Father, his heart is able now to reach out, beyond all the limits of space and time, to be wherever God's love is. And so he is able to be with us. He promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself' (John 12:32). In the Creed we speak of him being seated at God's right hand - which is our way of saying that he is at the heart of God's acting in the world, powerfully bringing about the reign of God's loving will in this our broken world. We can still resist God's loving advances - hence the continual corruption of sin in our personal and communal lives. But nothing can stop God's love, and millions are welcoming this love and responding to it heroically in their lives. For all the hate which we witness, there is much more love in our world than there is hate.

We know the way Jesus relates to us now, because we saw the way he related to us before death took him from our sight and our touch. He whom God lifted up to himself is he whom we lifted up on a cross. If we want to see what it means for Jesus to ascend, we should contemplate the glorified Christ reigning from the cross. The words which he spoke from the cross teach us the way in which he will always relate to us. He longs to forgive our sins. He longs to take us with him to be with him forever in God's embrace. He is thirsty for our hearts, and from his pierced side he pours out upon us the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist to cleanse and nourish us. He is constantly giving us the very Spirit of love that binds him to the Father, so that we can love with his love.

The feast of the Ascension reminds us that the goal of our life is the same as his. We, and all those whom we love, are called like Jesus to enjoy undistracted communion with God for ever.

Today we also thank God for the community of Jesus' disciples to whom it our privilege to belong. In the words of today's Second Reading, this is 'the Church, which is his body, the fullness of Him who fills the whole creation'(Ephesians 1:23). When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus replied that to see him is to see the Father (John 14:9). Similarly, if we want to see the face of Jesus we have only to look upon the face of the Church. Of course we need to be discerning. The Church is composed of sinners like you and me who have been partly enlightened by Jesus but who are still partly living in the dark. The Church is composed of people like you and me who long for God but who can easily be distracted and fail, sometimes seriously. And so we look at the face of the saints, and we look at each other and marvel at the goodness that we see there. It is Jesus who is loving in and through us; it is Jesus who is praying in and through us. So we thank God for the holiness that is evident in the community in which he dwells as in a temple.

The Spirit of love who comes from his heart comes to us through the community, especially through the sacraments. We think of the three sacraments of initiation into the community. In Baptism we were united to Jesus and in Confirmation his Spirit was poured into our hearts. In Communion we are taken into heaven for a few moments and are given a taste of the communion with God and with all those we love. Here, we are harnessing for God the energies of love. There, we will enjoy undistracted communion.

Then there is the beautiful sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus is always ready to forgive, heal and encourage us. In Marriage and in Sacred Orders our way of loving and our way of ministering to others is consecrated so that whenever we love, it is he who is loving in us, and whenever we serve it is Jesus who is serving in us. Finally, when we are losing our hold on life, our final journeying to God is surrounded by grace through the sacrament of Anointing. Jesus promised that if we listen to the community we will hear him. Today we thank God in a special way for the Church, for it is there that Jesus continues to dwell in a special way, coming to us in intimate, personal ways and drawing us to himself.

Finally, today we are meant to allow ourselves to experience in a special way Jesus' absence. Like the disciples we are sad at his not being here with us where we can see him and touch him and experience being loved by him the way we can love each other. We are allowed to miss him, for this reminds us that we are not meant to find our final home in this world. We each have to walk our own journey. It will be a journey of joy and suffering, as was his. We are encouraged by Jesus words: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world'(John 17:24).

As today's preface reminds us: 'Christ has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. He is the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow'. We are encouraged in this hope by Jesus' promise: 'I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also'(John 14:3).

As we sing out our joy in his happiness, let us thank God for those who have introduced us to him and who have died and gone to join him in God's eternal embrace. It is for this that we were created. Let us live 'for the praise of his glory'(Ephesians 1:12); that is to say let our lives be such that others who are searching for meaning in their lives will look upon our face and see there

the face of Jesus; they will draw close to our heart and find themselves close to the heart of Jesus.