

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
June 2, 2019 – Ascension of the Lord
Luke 24:46-53

Family departures can often be difficult. Usually they initiate spatial separation from loved ones. "Children" leave home for school, a new job or military service. Most of the time, sadness comes to the surface. But not always. When our children left home to study (hopefully) at schools far from home or when they "left" for a new job, I felt a mixture of joy and sorrow. Joy arose from thoughts of their going to better places for them, settings where they would enjoy new people and places, new opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. But I would miss them, so if I was deeply affected as they moved out of sight - my tears were a mix of joy and sorrow. Good to see you go into newness for you and why do you have to leave? Typical reactions in families.

Today we recall the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. When I first learned about this event, I was a youngster. Being a student in a Catholic School, the day when we celebrated the Ascension was on a Thursday. It was a Holy Day of Obligation. Mass attendance was required of all Catholics. So, the day began with the whole student body of St. Joseph Catholic School gathered for eight-o'clock Mass. And then we were dismissed. We were free to roam the whole world while our public-school friends were kept all-day in school. This added to my experience of the day, which was already "interesting" as I thought about Jesus rising into the clouds. I was likely shown by a nun teacher an artistic rendering of this happening. Up, up and away went Jesus. His followers watched him disappear into the clouds above. Very impressive.

Yet as believers in Christ Risen, we know that Jesus remains present to us. Belief in the contemporary Christ is complicated. We believe that Jesus "sits at the right hand of the Father" while at the same time Jesus remains with us. He is present in the Eucharist. He is present when we reflect on and pray connected with God's word in Scripture. And Christ is especially present in the love between us. A traditional prayer of the church includes the belief that where charity and love are present, there is God, there is Christ. And this is not simply an imaginative idea. It's real!

In that sense, when we truly love, when we pay attention to each other, when we help each other make it through the day, we are in the immediate presence of God and that includes the Risen Christ. So, one thought for this day is that we ourselves are already in the process of "ascending," just as Jesus did on that hill outside a small village called Bethany.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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June 9, 2019 – Pentecost
John 20:19-23

Last month, I mentioned that one of the greatest of human fears is that of feeling totally alone. Even for those living alone, they are helped by the idea that they have family and friends who are thinking of them. Thus, they are not *totally* alone. Of course, that feeling of physical separation can be lessened by an occasional call, a letter, a card, and in our time, by a text.

This fear of aloneness even affected the first followers of Jesus. They wanted to remain with him. And even though he occasionally appeared to them after his Resurrection, they longed for a presence that was more constant. In a sense, closer. And they were not to be disappointed in this desire.

One of the dangers of celebrating the feast of Pentecost is to shorten or abbreviate its impact. We may think of it as a "one-time event" which, once it ended, it was over. We fail to think about its deeper, more timeless meaning. In other words, the fact is that God's Spiritual presence is not an "up and down and back up again" affair.

Rather, Pentecost recalls and celebrates God's constant presence with us. God's Spirit is always with us and in us and around us. God is never distant from us although we know all too well that we can be distanced from God. We are distracted by immediate matters. We forget about spiritual realities. We live more on the surface of life than in its fullness.

The Holy Spirit is the least-understood and most-forgotten person of the Blessed Trinity. Yet it is our long-held belief that the Holy Spirit is continuously "renewing the face of the earth." (A phrase taken from a common church prayer to the Holy Spirit.) And this action of God's Spirit is done primarily through us, through our acts of kindness, assistance to others and expressions of forgiveness.

Maybe part of the problem is that the Holy Spirit is not visible on the surface of things. It is a hidden presence, yet it is constantly active, inviting us to live more fully as we connect more deeply with others. An image from science might help. Life on Earth is totally dependent on the energy that flows from the sun. If that flow of energy stopped for a second, all life would cease on Earth. The passage of solar energy is carried by light or photons, a reality that is without matter. It is pure energy. I like to think of the divine energy that flows from God's Spirit in a similar way. Pure energizing love coming directly to us from God's Spirit.

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June 16, 2019 – The Most Holy Trinity
John 16:12-15

While it is surely a challenge for us to attempt to understand God as a Trinity, there are some wonderful matters worthy of our thought as we try to grasp this, perhaps the most profound of the truths of our Christian faith. In fact, as soon as we think we fully understand God we are surely wrong. Still, let's float a few ideas which, while not "the last word," they can serve as a few first words of partial understanding.

Let's begin with the thought that there is diversity yet unity within God. And in that diversity, there is total agreement, complicity and cooperation. An early heresy in the church claimed that there were two gods, a harsh and fearful god of the Old Testament and a loving God of the New Testament. This erroneous belief about God might have contributed to the spread of anti-Semitism, even among Christians. In response to this error, while there are certainly a variety of descriptions of the divine scattered through Holy Scripture, there is no foundation to believe that they describe the actions of two different deities. God is One.

Further, there are many references in the New Testament to there being total agreement or oneness between Christ and Abba, the Father, as well as God's Spirit, who is given more attention after the Ascension of Christ. We sense this oneness of God in the gospel reading for today. To use a human image, God's Kingdom is ruled by committee, but there is no need for there to be debate or "voting" within God. God's ways with us are consistently loving and always merciful, a major theme of Pope Francis.

In fact, it is more accurate to think of God's life as loving that anything else. The best (and most accurate) description of God is love! God has always been loving (even before creation) and will continue to love forever. God's love is between the three persons in God. St. Augustine put it this way: One person in God loves, another is the beloved and the third is the love between them. There is, however, no first, second and third in this loving existence within God. It's all happening simultaneously - and it has always been that way. I know, that's hard to imagine but certainly worth thinking about.

Finally, from that divine eternal loving, you and I came into being. God loved and we exist! Why do we exist? Perhaps one way to respond would be to say that God wants to share life with others. That's what "loving" means. Not just human life but, as the church teaches, participation in God's life. A good prayer for this Sunday: Thank you God for sharing your love and creating us.

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June 23, 2019 – The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)
Luke 9:11-17

Last summer our family from near and far gathered at our home in Montana for my birthday. We were celebrating a major mile-marker, the one somewhere between sixty-five and eighty-one. You can guess which one. The central celebratory event was quite naturally a meal to which were invited family and a few friends. The actual meal was preceded by relaxing beverages and it culminated with a huge cake covered with flaming candles and the usual song. It would be hard to imagine such a gathering without food and drink. And mostly, of course, family.

Today's gospel recounts one of the many meals Jesus celebrated with his close friends and anyone who had interest in him - or he in them. This one was perhaps the largest, a cast of thousands. There are eleven communal meals described in Luke's gospel. His opponents (and he certainly had some) criticized him because he ate with known outsiders and sinners (according to their judgment). Even they knew the power of sharing food with others.

Some of these shared meals happened before his death and resurrection and some later. What's worthy of mention is that Jesus never ate alone in Luke's gospels - or in any of the other gospels. Shared meals were obviously important not only because life required food, but also because of their symbolic meaning. Sharing food symbolized sharing life. Nourishment came from the food and drink consumed, but even more importantly from eating and drinking together. And nourishment especially came from the *sharing* of lives that was part of the gathering

This Sunday Catholics around the world celebrate the feast of the Body of Christ, formerly called *Corpus Christi* Sunday. In some countries the Eucharist is publicly carried in procession through the streets amid great festivity. Reverence for the Eucharist is at the center of Catholic life. In a real sense, the active presence of Jesus in the Christian community means that the presence of Christ continues in the life of the church today.

But there might be a problem. Because the Eucharist is so common in Catholic circles, people can grow used to it and relate to it without much thought. Things we do over and over again can slip into becoming routine, automatic, habitual. Like people we live with and see every day, we can take them for granted and hardly notice their presence or absence. Whenever Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist, I imagine that he is quite conscious of each of us. He is aware of our presence, our thoughts at that moment, the love in our hearts. Are we equally aware of him and the gift that he is to each of us?

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June 30, 2019 – 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 9:51-72

I think that there's a bit of a procrastinator in all of us. It's certainly there in our children. I make a simple request of them like clean the garage, pick up the mess in the yard, straighten your room, set the table or do the dishes and I expect immediate action. In the history of our family immediate response to my requests happened maybe twice - or even less. Of course, when I look in the mirror, I see the face of a convicted procrastinator. My annual, monthly, weekly or daily "to do list," rarely gets immediate attention, if at all. Important matters almost always intervene, easily becoming excellent excuses for me to delay what I was supposed to do. Sound familiar?

In today's gospel Jesus calls his disciples to follow him - right away. Let's get going, he says. Don't make excuses. The Kingdom of God is now in play. The game is on. Its demands are there right now. So, let's get going. Don't waste the precious time being given right now. Opportunity knocks.

All the gospels begin with a declaration that with the coming of the Christ, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Not only has the long-awaited messiah come, he also began acting in accord with its demands. He went about doing good. He healed the sick and brought comfort to the afflicted. Once he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, he passed on the task of building God's Kingdom to his followers. It was now their turn to imitate his acts of love and service, especially toward those in most need. Their God-given job was not to begin when they felt like it or were in the right mood. It was to begin immediately!

One of the creative acts of Jesus was to extinguish the separation between the profane and the sacred, what's thought of as religious and what isn't. All times and places were now potentially sacred. The Kingdom is now being co-created by God's Spirit and us, here and now. The Kingdom of God is at hand!

When Jesus was asked to point to a Kingdom gesture, he said that whenever one gave a cup of water to a thirsty child, the Kingdom of God was created. In other words, all gestures of assistance, of doing a good deed, of offering a supportive word, the Kingdom is being created "on earth as it is in heaven." Each day you and I are invited to acts of discipleship. We are being given an invitation to follow the Lord throughout the day. Are we aware of such invitations? Are we willing to go that extra mile with someone needing a kind word or helping hand? The invitation of Jesus to follow him might come to you in the next minute.

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