

HOMILY FOR ASCENSION, YEAR B (2009)
(Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Mark 16:15-20)

DON'T JUST STAND THERE – DO SOMETHING (TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL)!

Betty came home from religion class all excited. Breathlessly she told her little brother that God made the whole world with just his left hand. When Mom heard this, she asked: Betty, why do you say that God made the whole world with his left hand?" Betty answered: "because the Bible tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven and sat on the right hand of his Father!"

The Feast of the Ascension gives us the opportunity to reflect on God's saving power in our lives. Not only did he create the universe, he also graciously re-created us in Christ. Before Jesus ascended back to his Father, he gave us a commission (as today's Gospel from Mark tells us) to "go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." This means we are called to be busy about sharing our faith.

In our first reading (from the Acts of the Apostles), after the account of the Lord's Ascension, the angel says to the apostles: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" The implication is that there is work to be done. Earlier in the passage, Jesus tells his closest associates that the Holy Spirit will soon come upon them to give them power to be their Lord's witnesses beginning in Jerusalem and eventually to the ends of the earth. So the angel is telling the apostles: there is no time to waste here – get started on your mission.

This message is also for us – and for all disciples throughout history. There is no time for standing around and navel gazing. We have the vocation as the church (as the Body of Christ) to carry out Jesus' commission.

It is a constant theme in the Acts of the Apostles that the life of Jesus continues in his church. There is a story from early in the 20th century about how a seeker who was Hindu came to see an Indian bishop. This Hindu had read the New Testament on his own. The scriptures had fascinated him and Christ had cast a spell on him. As he read on, he felt he had entered into a new world. In the gospels it was Jesus and his works and his sufferings that captivated this man. In the Acts of the Apostles, he was struck with what the disciples did and thought and taught and he began to see that their ministry had taken the place that Christ had occupied. The church continued where Jesus had left off at his death. "Therefore," said this Hindu man to the bishop, "I must belong to *the church that carries on the life of Christ.*" The Book of the Acts tells of the church that carries on the life of Christ.

And you and I still carry on the Lord's life.

However, there are always challenges to being witnesses to gospel living. The disciples were timid after Jesus ascended. They were afraid – and understandably so, since Jesus seemed to have abandoned them. It was only after the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost (which we celebrate next week) that they were enabled by grace to begin to preach effectively.

So it is with us. There is much in life that is bumpy and that puts us into the same kind of "in-between time" that the apostles experienced between Ascension and Pentecost. The loss of a loved one can put us in a vacuum and the future is a little hard to

face. When parents say goodbye to their kids going away to college or become empty nesters, they are in an in-between time – between pain and promise. Those of you who have ever lost a job (as many have these days) really know what in between time is about. This recession has put us all on edge. Perhaps worst of all is suffering through broken relationships, whether it's divorce or the break-up of a friendship or estrangement from a child who seemingly is living a life contrary to how you raised him or her.

Yes, this in-between time of the apostles is something you and I know a lot about. And maybe when these challenging things happen to us, we can take a page from the book of these same apostles who took a couple of important steps while they waited for Pentecost. The first thing they did was to gather in prayer. They were, in fact, at prayer in the upper room when the Spirit came on Pentecost. And Jesus had told them to wait patiently and prayerfully (as we see in the reading today from Acts). They just didn't know what to do except that they had to pray for guidance, even when it was difficult to pray. And I imagine that it had to be. All they knew was that their leader was dead. He had promised the Spirit and the Spirit had not yet come. They didn't know whether they had a future as followers of Christ or whether they should just split up and go back into the mainstream and back to their day jobs. And even though they were not inclined to do so, they prayed. So that's the first advice that Luke who wrote this story in Acts gives us on how to handle the "in between times" of our lives.

The second thing the apostles and other disciples did between Ascension and Pentecost was to make plans for carrying on the work of Jesus after the promised Spirit came. In the passage in Acts right after the one we heard today, the disciples elected Matthias to take the place of Judas and they persistently gathered their strength for spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Like the Hindu man in the story above, it was dawning on these followers of Christ that they indeed were now the community that carries on the life of Christ. St Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) put it this way: "Christ has no body here on earth but yours now, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; your eyes are the eyes through which Christ looks compassionately on the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now." Pentecost gave the disciples (including us) the guts to be the Body of Christ in the world. And even in the midst of our crises and challenges, God gives us the grace to remember who we are – Christ to one another.

Eventually (no matter what our struggles), we often experience anew the power of the Spirit in our lives and we are able to resume our Christian vocation after a loss or an illness or a tough financial crisis. We get back on our feet as we plug in once again into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. And most of the time most of us would have to say that we are greatly blessed. Usually, the in between times don't last too long. (And, dear Lord, may this recession not last long!) Like the early disciples who received the Spirit on Pentecost, we regain our hope and our trust in God through prayer and persistence. And we are able to resume our calling to preach the gospel, despite the challenges. Instead of standing around looking up to heaven, we joyfully do our humble part to fulfill the Lord's great commission found in today's gospel to **GO INTO THE WHOLE WORLD AND PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE.**