

Feast of the Ascension

May 4, 2008

I will start off with some sad news we received this week. Many of you remember Fr. Stricker who was pastor here before I came. And many of you probably by now are aware that this week he was accused of sexual abuse of a young boy. The event was supposed to have happened back in the 1950's. The alleged victim brought his accusation to the Archdiocese 15 years ago; at that time it was judged to be unsubstantiated. He came forward again a few weeks ago with what the news reported to be new information. This time the case was judged to have a "semblance of truth." That means it looked as if there might be something to it. So according to the Bishop's policy, Fr. Stricker must be put on suspension until the case is resolved. He is no longer living at Little Flower Church and prefers that his new residence not be made public. Although a priest may be suspended, it does not mean he is guilty. In our country a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. In case a person does have a tendency toward pedophilia, our national Church policy was drawn up in a strict fashion for the protection of others. Because it is so strict, a number of priests who eventually were acquitted had to suffer through a period of suspension. One of them was a classmate of mine, and I know it wasn't easy. This won't be easy for Fr. Stricker either.

I knew Fr. Stricker while I was in the seminary, but I didn't know him well. However, in December, 1990, when I was assigned to St. Patrick's Church here in Northside, I got to know him very well. With the assignment I received, I was told to start the process of merging St. Patrick with St. Boniface. Fr. Stricker and I worked well together, along with parish leaders in both parishes, to make this merger one of the smoothest mergers in the Archdiocese. Once the merger was completed, I became pastor here and Fr. Stricker stayed on for over a year as my associate. I know him as a man with the highest integrity, a man who is deeply spiritual, humble, with a great sense of humor when he gets to know you. He is totally dedicated to serving God and God's people. Since his retirement in 1993 - up until this week when he was put on leave - he has continued his priestly ministry at Little Flower, working as hard as he ever did. During the past 15 years he has continued to come back here weekly to meet with our Legion of Mary as spiritual director. He was just getting ready to celebrate his 60th anniversary as a priest. I know he would appreciate prayers from those who knew him and loved him. At the same time I know him well enough that he would want us to pray also for all victims of abuse.

The feast of the Ascension does not, at first, impress us as a happy event either. Jesus ascended to eternal glory at the right hand of the Father leaving his apostles behind staring into the clouds. However, he did not leave them to fend for themselves without any help. He had promised them the help of the Holy Spirit and he promised them: "I will be with you always." This is a wonderful promise to always remember, in good times and in bad. It is the theme that begins St. Matthew's gospel when he tells us Jesus would be known as Emmanuel, a name that means God is with us. Matthew ends his gospel with the same message.

We like to picture Jesus' ascension exactly the way St. Luke describes it in today's first reading.

However, Luke is trying to illustrate a mystery for us, a mystery that is beyond visual perception. To help you understand why I say that, just consider this. The scene St. Luke gives us takes place in Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, just two miles from Jerusalem. Tour guides still point out the exact spot where Jesus supposedly stood. They encourage tourists to use their imagination as they show them his footprint on the rock. The gospel of St. Matthew, which we just heard, tells us Jesus met with his Apostles in Galilee and departed from them there. Does that confuse you? Hopefully, it tells us the ascension is not something that could have been videotaped. It tells us we're dealing with mystery. Certainly Jesus was no longer with his apostles in a visible and tangible way as he was before his crucifixion. Although his physical body had now entered into the glory of heaven, he would still be with his apostles but in a different way. Just to clear up the mystery a little bit, St. Matthew's message seems to be that Jesus met his apostles for the last time in Galilee because Galilee was half pagan. This implied that the message of the gospel is meant for all people. Matthew verbalizes this message too when he quotes Jesus as saying: "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

That would have been a task far greater than any eleven people could accomplish even with help from the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus' words are meant to reach out beyond his first followers to all of us. Jesus wants the message of God's love to reach all people. The job's still not finished.

Let me try to sum up my thoughts on the ascension. The ascension shows us the full glory of the resurrection, sharing in God's glory eternally, a preview of God's plan for all the rest of us who have followed Christ faithfully. The ascension also tells us that Christ is still with us. As he said in the gospel last week, "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you...The world will no longer see me, but you will see me." Finally, the ascension tells us we have a job to do. We can't spend all our days staring up to the heavens wondering where he's gone, or what he's doing, or what heaven will be like for us. Occasionally it's good to contemplate the next life, it motivates us to live a good life, but we also need to hear what the angels said to the Apostles after Jesus ascended: "Why are you standing there, looking up at the sky?" In effect, I think the angels were saying: "You have a lot of work ahead of you if you're going to make disciples of all nations. You better get with it." Don't forget why the Mass is called the Mass. It's because the priest used to say at the end: "Ite, missa est," which means "Go, you have been sent." It's our job to bring God's love, which we celebrate in our liturgy, out to the world. Amen.